



## Around the world: France's new popular music diplomacy

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### ABSTRACT

Music, and especially popular music, plays a prominent role in the race for international soft power, and is now recognised as an important factor for the study of international relations. This paper endeavours to present and examine contemporary French music diplomacy, that is the ways in which French institutions abroad use and diffuse music in general, and specifically popular music, to gain international influence, and which is still an unexplored area of research. In this context, it will identify the shift from a focus on elite culture towards an economic, neoliberal approach designed not only to export music 'made in France', but also to convey a new image of France on the international stage, a modernised 'nation brand' based, among other things, on its 'trendy' music. To this end, the paper first introduces the role of music in general and of popular music in particular in diplomatic contexts. Then, it provides a brief survey of the public agencies involved in the promotion of French music abroad and their different actions and strategies. Finally, it discusses the diplomatic, commercial and symbolic issues at stake in these policies and how they interplay with one another, especially in relation to nation branding and French soft power priorities.

### RÉSUMÉ

La musique, et notamment la musique populaire, a acquis un rôle prééminent dans la course pour le 'soft power' international. Cet article vise précisément à présenter la diplomatie française actuelle liée à la musique en général et à la musique populaire en particulier, à savoir, les efforts du réseau extérieur français pour diffuser et promouvoir ce type de musique afin d'accroître l'influence et l'attractivité de la France à l'étranger. En effet, en dépit de l'importance de la musique dans l'étude des relations internationales, la diplomatie musicale française actuelle n'a pas fait l'objet de recherches systématiques à ce jour. Le travail vise ainsi à décrire son évolution, d'une diplomatie basée sur la culture d'élite vers une approche économiciste, néolibérale, destinée à vendre la musique 'made in France' mais aussi à donner une image nouvelle de la France sur la sphère internationale, projetant une nouvelle 'nation brand' (marque de pays), moderne, basée, entre autres, sur ses musiques actuelles. A cet effet, j'introduirai en premier le rôle de

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la musique, et notamment de la musique populaire, dans les contextes diplomatiques. Ensuite, je décrirai la diplomatie musicale française en présentant brièvement les institutions impliquées dans sa diffusion et sa promotion à l'étranger ainsi que leurs différentes actions et leurs stratégies. Enfin, j'analyserai les enjeux diplomatiques, économiques et symboliques de cette politique extérieure notamment en rapport avec la marque pays et les priorités du soft power français.

Music's ability to generate emotions and convey ideas and 'identities' across borders has long been used by states in what has been called 'music diplomacy' (Gienow-Hecht 2015; Ahrendt, Ferraguto, y Mahiet 2014). Indeed, historically, music has been played and listened to in palaces, embassies and concert-halls, places of power and influence, in order to represent, to mediate and to negotiate (Ahrendt, Ferraguto, y Mahiet 2014, 8–10).

Over the last century, music, and especially popular music, has played a prominent role in conflicts (armed and otherwise) (O'Connell and Castelo-Branco 2010). Probably, the best-known example is the musical 'action' undertaken by the USA, China and the USSR during the Cold War, which involved sending thousands of musicians abroad as informal ambassadors to convey the 'positive' values of their respective cultures. Beyond the well-researched American case<sup>1</sup>, since 1945, from Eurovision to the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, the list of musical events conceived and/or developed both by public and private bodies in order to make an impact on foreign individuals, communities and nations is long and varied<sup>2</sup>. All have in common the desire to project a positive image of the state or the institution which is responsible for them. Although their actual success in pragmatic terms is far from guaranteed, their very existence, their frequency and the symbolic place they still hold in the media and in public agendas prove the importance of music in contemporary international relations. Music diplomacy is thus a central element both in cultural diplomacy and civic advocacy. It serves 'soft power' agendas particularly well: that is, the search for influence on foreign actors (nations as well as civil institutions and individuals) through attraction and not coercion. Culture, and values conveyed by cultural products, are thus primary means for generating 'soft power' (Nye 2004). In this sense, music diplomacy is now considered a powerful tool for 'nation branding', as recently analysed by Gienow-Hecht (2018). Research in this field is relatively new, but recent events<sup>3</sup> and publications<sup>4</sup> confirm the vitality of what has been labelled the 'acoustic turn in international relations' (Ramel 2018; Ramel and Prévost-Thomas 2018).

In spite of the undeniable role of popular music in today's diplomacy and the 'acoustic turn' in the study of International Relations, there are no comprehensive up-to-date academic studies on contemporary French music diplomacy. While Danièle Pistone (2014) accurately describes how the Association française d'expansion et d'échanges artistiques (AFAA) disseminated French music abroad from 1922 until 2006—its elitist view on art and music (Pistone 2014, 32) favouring classical and contemporary music, with quality and excellence as its main criteria (Pistone 2014, 30)—, no research has focused on the major changes undergone by French music diplomacy since 2006, with the reorganisation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, including the creation of the new Institut Français, as an EPIC (*établissement public à caractère industriel et commercial*), in 2011.

This article will therefore endeavour to engage with the important but neglected field of French music diplomacy in more recent times.

My main objective is to present a panorama of current French public institutions which resort to music, and especially popular music, for international purposes. More precisely, I will examine the evolution of French music diplomacy since 2006, that is the shift from a focus on ‘art’ music to ‘popular music’, officially labelled *musiques actuelles et jazz* by French institutions. I will contend that this significant change has been motivated by several factors, including the search for larger audiences and new export markets, and the will to convey a new image of France on the international stage. In doing so, I will endeavour to identify and to reflect on the interactions between the cultural, the commercial and the symbolic issues at stake in current French cultural policy. I should emphasise that the research is ongoing and that my aim in the present article is simply to undertake a first mapping of what is in fact a new and evolving area of research, which will hopefully lead to more in-depth analysis in future publications.

The study will be structured as follows. First, it will look at the relationship between music—in particular popular music—and cultural diplomacy. Second, within the broader context of French cultural policy and diplomacy, it will survey the institutions involved in French music diplomacy (mainly the Institut Français, the Bureau Export, the Alliance Française, Business France and RFI), presenting their specific role, their actions and the type of music that they diffuse. The analysis of the scant and relatively opaque data available on these institutions will be fleshed out by personal interviews with actors in the field. Finally, it will discuss the reasons which both motivate and reflect the new trends in French music diplomacy and its role in France’s ‘nation brand’ nowadays.

## Music diplomacy and popular music

In diplomacy, music is always an instrument for achieving something. By displaying famous or prestigious artists and musical styles, musical diplomacy—like cultural diplomacy in general—has traditionally aimed to relay values which can be considered positive in a target international context. As shown by Jessica Gienow-Hecht (2012), symphonic orchestras have been the privileged form of musical diplomacy over the last one hundred years. With their solemn and prestigious repertoire, orchestras endeavour to ‘represent the nation’ and ‘seek to display leadership and symbolize the authority’ of the state behind them ‘while audiences remain quiet and attentive’ (Gienow-Hecht 2012, 26). They embody the ‘official’ values of a given country and also its power. In the French case, Jann Pasler (2009, 231–299) has analysed the importance of music, especially of opera in the Third Republic, as a diplomatic tool for ‘composing’ the image of French Republic, at home and abroad.

Coinciding with the rise of the mass media and youth culture, especially after World War II, popular music<sup>5</sup> has gradually penetrated the international arena, adopting forms and pursuing objectives which are not quite the same as those of classical repertoires. Here, contrary to traditional diplomatic and formal venues, there is no solemn quietude but what appears to be an active and direct engagement. Moreover, unlike art music, popular music appeals to larger and younger audiences, and is usually—although not always—associated with non-conservative ideologies, and may even (rightly or wrongly)

be linked to progressive political change. Most importantly, popular music is the product of a buoyant industry, evolving in the globalised and ever-growing digital context.

There are many examples over the last 60 years which confirm the importance of popular music in building soft power, that is the will to win the minds—and the hearts—of foreign actors. This is conspicuously the case with the multicultural, non-imperialistic view of America encouraged by the ‘jazz ambassadors’ during the Cold War years<sup>6</sup>. More recently, other examples of successful popular music diplomacy can be cited, such as the ‘cool’ image of South Korea offered by K-pop; the ‘trendy-geek’ picture of Japan presented by ‘pop culture democracy’; the passionate and enjoyable feeling created by ‘Latin’ music around Latin America and Spain, and so on. These examples show that the music industry can benefit from the use of popular music in international relations, while diplomacy can in turn profit from the industry’s efforts to enter international markets in its search for influence and attraction, and for creating a positive nation-brand.

For its part, as analysed by Pistone (2014), until 2006, French cultural diplomacy via the AFAA clearly favoured ‘art’ music (classical or contemporary) over popular music, following traditional aesthetic hierarchies. However, the situation has radically changed since then, and it is now much more likely for a French embassy to programme a ‘soirée électro’ than a ‘soirée Saint-Saëns’. Indeed, popular music (*musiques actuelles et jazz*) is by far the most visible in French diplomatic actions nowadays.

At this point, it is important to briefly recall what the term ‘French popular music’<sup>7</sup> signifies, especially for international audiences. French popular music has traditionally been associated with *chanson*, which has contributed to France’s image as a romantic and glamorous yet intellectually rich country<sup>8</sup>. However, French popular music as a discursive category, mainly based on a vague notion of ‘Frenchness’ rather than on stylistic or generic features, has undergone many changes, including the assimilation of imported/globalised musical styles such as rap, reggae and techno, and the increasing use of the English language. This evolution goes hand in hand with the profound changes undergone by French culture and society since 1945. At the same time, France’s official image, conveyed by public diplomacy—its nation brand—is evolving in an attempt to reflect these very sociocultural and economic changes. This new image relies on the traditional French imaginary and on the clichés (the romantic Paris, the accordion, the finesse, the lyric and intellectual ambition, etc., while updating them in tune with what France is today or, rather, with what it wants to be in the future, at least according to President Macron and his voters, that is, to this day, the majority of French citizens<sup>9</sup>: a neoliberal yet cultural nation, on top of technological change and still at the forefront of artistic creation.

Two recent events in which popular music has played a major role demonstrate the Elysée’s will to create this new image of France both home and abroad while preserving an essential Frenchness. The most recent is the showcasing of French electronic music for the first time during the Fête de la musique (Music Day) in June 2018 at the Elysée Palace. On this occasion, by transforming such a solemn place into a dancefloor, with performances by Kavinsky and Chloé among other French Touch artists in front of an exclusive crowd of 1,500, the President was evidently trying to convey, mainly to a national audience, an image of trendiness, coolness and youth, for himself, for his policies and for his country, while also showing the importance of French culture across the world<sup>10</sup>.

The second event is even more telling in this respect. Macron’s first Fête Nationale as President in 2017 offered a good demonstration of this alliance of ‘modernity’ and

'tradition' when a band in military uniform played a mashup of Daft Punk hits in front of a clearly amused Macron and a puzzled Donald Trump<sup>11</sup>. A stroke of genius in terms of media impact—as indeed was the invitation of the American president for such an occasion—this unusual performance is significant in several ways. The choice of an electronic pop group instead of traditional military marches was designed to convey a modern, youthful image of France still linked to its historical heritage—and also to its military power. Moreover, Daft Punk is probably the most global French pop group nowadays as well as the epitome of French Touch, with songs in English which bear no resemblance to *chanson*. Thus was presented an image of a country oriented towards the international scene, and which has successfully gained a foothold in global markets. This performance was thus intended to act as a symbol of innovation and savoir-faire, of both cultural and economic success, of France as an 'admirable' nation whose culture still is its better self, for its own citizens and for foreigners.

These examples, then, which remind us of the use of popular music during the ceremony for the Olympics in London 2012, were intended to show a modern, innovative France, fully engaged in the international competition for popular culture and entertainment. But they also raise broader questions about the place and the use of culture in diplomatic contexts, about the type of culture which is chosen to represent France and about the very role of culture within state policy, both on the national and international levels.

In the next sections, and within the larger context of French cultural policy and diplomacy, I will try to explore some of these questions by looking more closely at French music diplomacy, mapping and describing the main institutions which use and promote music abroad nowadays. Hopefully, this panorama will help us examine the interactions between diplomatic, cultural and commercial goals, and the political priorities they reveal.

## French popular music diplomacy

Culture, considered both in its limited sense (the arts) and in its widest sense (the arts and ways of life), is of capital importance in France. The creation of the famous Ministry of Cultural Affairs by André Malraux in 1959, following a tradition of intense and ambiguous relations between the state, the arts and education since 1789, crystallised the concept of culture as a matter of public interest. Indeed, France is perceived as the model for cultural interventionism in democratic regimes, and the French Constitution asserts the State's responsibility to provide its citizens with equal access to culture. But culture in France is more than a legal obligation: heated and often public debates about the place of culture in everyday life and its relationship with state institutions are relatively frequent, and governments<sup>12</sup>, even the most liberal<sup>13</sup>, recognise the special and privileged status of culture. From the controversy surrounding the 'État culturel' during the late 1980s and early 1990s to the debates on 'cultural exception' in the 2000s, culture is seen as crucial for French identity and French politics. At the same time, culture is one of France's biggest assets in economic terms<sup>14</sup>. The strategic position of culture for the economy is underlined both by governments and the cultural industries. In fact, and especially following Jack Lang's mandates as Minister of Culture (1981–1993), the 'valorisation of the cultural industries as an economic reality capable of reviving France's economy' (Looseley 2011, 372) has been recognised and fostered by successive governments until the present day, both in national and international contexts. In turn, cultural industries regularly call for

renewed public support in times of economic crisis and for a reconsideration of the role of the state in cultural affairs<sup>15</sup>.

Music specifically plays a major role in the French 'cultural state'. Historically, art music was the music valued and favoured in and by French public education and institutions. However, at least since Jack Lang's mandates, popular music has also been placed under the protection of French state and is now treated in similar ways as art music, in recognition of both its democratising and its economic value (Looseley 1995). In economic terms, revenues (direct and indirect) from the music industries reached almost 8 billion euros in 2014 (Ernst&Young 2015). Therefore, from the institutional point of view, popular music, like other forms of 'popular culture' such as cinema or comic books, has evolved from being considered a mere form of entertainment, to being perceived as the perfect alliance between national artistic creation, accessibility and commercial profit.

Where international relations are concerned, although France is still today one of the biggest economies in the world, its status as a 'great power' is being seriously questioned. What was left of France's *grandeur* after World War II, with decolonisation and the rise of the USA as the new economic and political world power, was precisely its artistic and intellectual prestige, its cultural influence, in other words, its *rayonnement*<sup>16</sup>. However, decolonisation, the decline of geopolitical influence and several internal political, economic and cultural crisis and disruptions, together with Americanisation and globalisation, exposed the apparent decadence of French cultural prestige both at home and abroad (Morrison and Compagnon 2008; Martel 2010). France's influence on global imaginaries was therefore seriously questioned<sup>17</sup>. Today, the race for soft power is tougher than ever, and traditional 'powers' have to compete with 'newcomers' such as China, India and Brazil. Still, in this contest for attractiveness, *The Soft Power 30* (McClory 2017, 2018) ranked France as the number 1 and number 2 nation in soft power in 2017 and 2018 respectively, and explicitly asserts that 'under Emmanuel Macron, the future of French soft power is bright'<sup>18</sup>.

Aside from these surveys, France has traditionally<sup>19</sup> been aware of the important role of culture in its diplomatic agenda and has deployed rich and positive 'cultural action abroad' (*action culturelle extérieure*)<sup>20</sup>. Since 1945, successive governments have tried to maintain and generate influence and attractiveness mainly through the promotion of the French language, and cultural and artistic exchanges, especially via the legitimised forms of culture: fine arts, literature and art music. Nowadays, cultural and scientific actions are managed under the umbrella of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which was reorganised in 2009 with the creation of the *Direction générale de la mondialisation, de la culture et des partenariats*, which became *Direction générale de la mondialisation, de la culture, de l'enseignement et du développement international* in 2015, replacing the AFAA and the ADPF (Association pour la diffusion de la pensée française). This new structure explicitly links cultural and educational affairs and development with globalisation, in an attempt to strengthen economic and commercial diplomacy (Lane 2016, 39–40). In doing so, culture ceases to be a common good and a '*supplément d'âme*', a spiritual asset, and is resolutely oriented to economic development, at the national and the international levels. In fact, like the Ministry of Culture in the 1980s, with this reorganisation, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was explicitly recognising, and even prioritising, the commercial value of culture in public diplomacy. Significantly, in 2015, Prime Minister Manuel Valls stated that 'Music, cinema, literature, graphic arts constitute, in a globalised economy, a true French «soft power», for our exports, our influence'<sup>21</sup>. At a more ideological level, these changes reveal

that globalisation in digital contexts calls for a questioning of the French cultural exception, now referred to as cultural diversity, and which has constituted much of the grounds of French cultural action until recently<sup>22</sup>. The very concept of culture as a non-marketable good is thus challenged.

As noted in the introduction, and despite its significance for understanding French cultural policy in general and cultural diplomacy in particular, there is no comprehensive public report or academic research which describes the evolution of French music diplomacy since 2006 and its actual *modus operandi*. In fact, there is very little public information about what French public and semi-public diplomatic institutions in that area are really doing and about the economic and human resources allocated to them. Therefore, assessing their actual role proves quite difficult; and in this respect, the interviews conducted have proved essential for the present study. Therefore, at this stage of the research, we need to briefly identify the actors of music diplomacy, especially popular music, focusing on their objectives, their actions and the music they promote. This will help us examine and assess the recent changes in cultural diplomacy in general and in music diplomacy in particular, focusing on the interplay between the will to convey an attractive image of France abroad while promoting its musical industry, in other words, the ways in which France has adapted its cultural diplomacy to the current globalised neoliberal environment.

The main institutions involved in popular music diplomacy and which will be described below are the Institut Français, the Bureau Export, Alliances françaises, Business France and RFI (Radio France Internationale).

### **Institut Français**

The Institut Français (IF) is the main institutional actor in charge of 'promoting France's cultural action abroad'<sup>23</sup>. As such, it is (or should be) responsible for the diffusion of French music, including art music (classical and contemporary) and popular music (*musiques actuelles et jazz*). It is difficult to evaluate the total number of musical events and actions which are organised or supported worldwide by the local Instituts Français because there are no adequate public reports on the activities organised in every local structure. Moreover, there was no official response to my queries when I contacted the person in charge of the 'pôle musiques actuelles et jazz'<sup>24</sup>. The only information available to the public is the IF annual report, in which the main actions of the institution are described but not in detail nor comprehensively. In the field of popular music, the 2017 report, for instance, highlights support for French emerging artists (FAIR) touring abroad, with 97 concerts given in 25 countries to a global audience of almost 75,000 people<sup>25</sup>, and the organisation of Equationmusique, a programme for the diffusion of the African music industry. One can imagine that these actions have an impact on target audiences, but there are neither official nor public studies to actually prove it. Indeed, and despite the publicity and transparency required by their public role and status, the actions of cultural diplomatic network and their impact are surrounded by opacity.

In terms of the selection of artists and music genres, the IF does not seem to follow a specific set of criteria. As noted earlier, in spite of some noticeable initiatives<sup>26</sup>, popular music was under-represented in French cultural diplomacy until at least the 1990s and the creation of Bureau Export in 1993 (Pistone 2014, 27). On the contrary, today, popular music seems to be favoured over art music. Within popular music genres, IF is supposed

to prioritise 'emerging artists', in what I believe to be an attempt to fulfil its 'cultural' mission, as stated by Gaëlle Massicot Bitty, responsible for performing arts and music at the IF<sup>27</sup>. However, it can also be argued that only artists with insufficient industry support need to resort to IF in their search for internationalisation. As we will see, mainstream and well-known artists are supported by their own companies or by the Bureau Export.

In economic terms, it is also difficult to evaluate the budget allowed for music projects compared to other cultural forms and products such as literature, cinema, theatre or the visual arts. Indeed, the public data available, namely the 'Programme 185' for the 'Diplomatie culturelle et d'influence'<sup>28</sup>, do not provide precise figures on the budget for specific cultural actions abroad, but only general ones.

As far as popular music is concerned, the IF focuses on the professional aspects of the music in an attempt to support the internationalisation of French artists, especially 'emerging' ones<sup>29</sup>. Indeed, it includes among its missions and objectives for 2017–2019 specifically the 'contribution to the development of French music industry abroad, in collaboration with French specialized bodies (notably Bureau Export, SACD, SACEM and CNV)<sup>30</sup>. Although it is not incompatible with a diplomatic and a cultural agenda per se, here we notice clearly a will to enhance the penetration of foreign markets, reaching new audiences. The specific actions undertaken to achieve these objectives—financing of French artists touring abroad, especially emerging and electronic artists<sup>31</sup>; supporting French acts performing in international festivals and professional showcases; and supporting networking and access to professional markets—, also confirm the IF's commercially-driven efforts.

### **Bureau Export**

Together with the IF, the Bureau Export (BE) is the main actor in the diffusion of French music abroad. A non-profit professional organisation, it was created in 1993 by French music industry with the specific aim of exporting French music of all styles. Based in Paris, the BE has six structures outside France (New York, London, Berlin, Abidjan, Singapore and Bogota). The diplomatic agenda—to win hearts and minds to France—is not completely absent in BE's action, but it is secondary compared to the interests of music industries which fund BE up to 70%. The BE's objectives are basically to provide support to 'Made in France' music artists and the French music industry on the international stage, and to assist and advise international professionals interested in French music. The means for achieving these goals are the creation and development of professional connections (showcases, networking events, list of contacts ...), the provision of information about French artists and music industry internationally via diverse communication strategies and media, and the funding of promotional and artistic activities related to the above, such as co-funding international tours, finding support structures for local distribution, etc. On the online front, the website and newsletter *Whatthefrance* intends to disseminate 'the finest music made in France' (<https://whatthefrance.org/fr/>).

It is important to stress that the logic behind all these actions is an economic one. This commercially-driven strategy is noticeable in the type of artists supported by Bureau Export, which tend to be well-known artists, signed with major or middle-sized record companies. For instance, in 2016, the artists who received its support were already 'famous' such as Kungs, Christine and The Queens, Imany, Jain, Alexandre Tharaud, Vincent Peirani, Imarhan, Petit Biscuit, Caravan Palace (Bureau Export 2017).



In the context of the symposium ‘Continental Popular Music and Cultural Policies in Contemporary Britain’ which I organised in November 2014 at the University of Leeds<sup>32</sup>, Eric Vandepoorter (2014), director of the Bureau Export in London at the time<sup>33</sup>, stressed the BE’s market-oriented strategy and the absence of discrimination between artists on aesthetic criteria but solely on commercial ones. He underlined the fact that, as far as BE was concerned, French music (Made in France music) was exclusively characterised by a production structure based in France. In this sense, many artists promoted by BE were not French. This was notably the case of internationally acclaimed Belgian Stromae, and of the many artists who can fall into the category of ‘world music’, such as Amadou & Mariam and Tinariwen, but who are produced by French record companies. The last available report on French music industry exports confirms this tendency: the best performances are those of artists who have no recognisable Frenchness in their music or their lyrics: Major Lazer, Kungs and Gregory Porter (Bureau Export 2018, 19). The very Frenchness of the ‘French touch’ stressed by Marc Thonon, BE’s general director (Bureau Export 2018, 3), can thus be questioned.

### ***Alliance Française***

The Alliance française (AF), a network of non-profit organisations ruled by local laws but integrated in the French cultural network abroad, play a minor role in the international diffusion of French music. Reports of AF cultural activities show that several concerts and events linked to music<sup>34</sup> are organised in the Alliances françaises each year all over the world, usually as part of the Fête de la musique (Music Day on June 21<sup>st</sup>) and/or the National Day (July 14<sup>th</sup>), sometimes with the support of French companies<sup>35</sup>. However, most Alliances françaises evolve mainly as certified schools of French language where cultural actions are organised depending on available funds. Therefore, music events, more expensive than film screenings or book launches, are relatively rare in AF’s cultural programmes.

### ***Business France***

Business France (BF), another public operator under the authority of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Economy, was created in 2014 in order to boost French exports and to attract foreign investments. Logically, popular music industries exports come under BF’s remit. In this sense, Business France should provide information and professional advice on foreign market penetration, including cultural industries, although these are not mentioned as such on the list of main economic sectors on its website. In fact, there is very little public information about Business France activities. In terms of popular music, BF enables French companies to attend professional music fairs and conventions. However, in countries where a BE exists, most actions related to popular music export are managed by the BE itself. Here, the goal is obviously a commercial one, and only companies (rather than artists) are supported.

### ***Radio France Internationale***

Although they cannot be considered as diplomatic institutions in the strict sense, French public radio and television, both national<sup>36</sup> and international, play a crucial role in

diffusing French culture and music abroad, especially in the digital era. More precisely, RFI (Radio France Internationale)<sup>37</sup>, under the auspices of the new public operator France Media Monde and thus of MEAE, broadcast in 13 languages all over the world to a potentially universal audience, is a powerful tool for music diplomacy, as well as a significant means for geostrategic influence, especially in French speaking Africa and the Caribbean<sup>38</sup>. The radio has daily and weekly programmes on French and Francophone popular music (Couleurs tropicales, La bande passante, Musiques du Monde, L'Épopée des musiques noires, Légendes urbaines) and provides complete and up-to-date biographies and discographies of more than 400 French and Francophone artists. Furthermore, the website RFI musique (<http://musique.rfi.fr/>) offers a 24-hour original musical programme in which Francophone music amounts to at least 60% of the total output. Moreover, RFI endorses 'RFI talent' artists, publishing and circulating their work. These artists are selected as representatives of the values of cultural diversity supported by RFI. Emerging African music is also supported via the contest 'Prix Découvertes', which helps young African artists to pursue a professional career.

The share of Francophone artists coming from Africa and Latin America (mainly the Caribbean, where French presence is still strong) broadcast and supported by RFI needs to be stressed. Indeed, as Eric Françaix (2019), main music programmer for RFI musique, confirmed in a personal interview, music selection is based on two main criteria: on the one hand, French and Francophone popular music and, on the other, African and Latin-American music. As a result, 60% of the music is sung in French and, in Françaix's words, RFI has a 'warm' colour ('*couleur chaude*'). The use of this term, with obvious 'Eurocentric' or even 'neocolonial' connotations, was used by Françaix as a synonym for diversity, as opposed to mainstream Anglo-American music<sup>39</sup>. These criteria, the only ones imposed by the general direction of RFI, are deemed both to fulfil RFI's main mission to disseminate French culture abroad<sup>40</sup> and to meet audiences' (mainly African and Caribbean) tastes and needs, clearly showing the will to preserve and cultivate the links between France and its former colonies.

Therefore, because of its extensive reach (over 41 million people per week according to RFI's website) and its multilingual and multicultural format with a focus on Francophone (mainly African and Caribbean) cultures, RFI is a powerful instrument for cultural diversity, which tries to portray France as one of its global champions. Indeed, RFI explicitly refers to itself as 'les voix du monde' (the voices of the world) in a clear attempt to foster a pluralistic view of France within a diverse global context. This positive image of France as truly engaged in cultural diversity, with aesthetic autonomy, especially in Africa, contributes, undoubtedly, to cultural legitimacy and also, in a broader context, to political legitimacy and thus to a soft power agenda. This could be connected to RFI's role before and after African decolonisation as a form of material, everyday diplomacy, as contended by Noe Cornago (2018).

In my opinion, the above panorama does not suggest a clear and coherent line of action in French music diplomacy. This is principally because several public and semi-public institutions (BE, BF and IF) are reputedly pursuing similar, and rather loose, objectives (to promote French artistic creation and to support French cultural industries), and resorting to very similar means and strategies to achieve them. However, behind this apparent lack of coordination, it is possible to identify a continuity, one which consists in promoting popular music above all else, with a particular emphasis on global pop music,

and not specifically 'French music'. This choice, far from being only aesthetic, confirms that the diplomatic/cultural goal (to win minds through aesthetic excellence) is nowadays tightly linked to a commercial objective (to earn money). In fact, the tendency is now to favour music as a commodity, with the notable exception of RFI, which works primarily as an instrument for cultural and political legitimacy. In the next pages, I will address some of the questions which arise from this new configuration of music diplomacy, mainly concerning the balance between the commercial, the cultural and the diplomatic objectives and its relation to public policies and nation-branding.

### **New music for a new France?**

The agreement on the commercial benefits of music exports seems only logical both for diplomats and for music professionals. But the actual results of public support of French music industry on the international stage in terms of influence and prestige seem less obvious. In fact, doubts still arise when assessing the role of public and semi-public institutions in this strategy of internationalisation and its actual links to cultural policy and cultural diplomacy. Firstly, the previous outlook does not show a clear line of action nor a definite policy regarding the place of music in French diplomatic action nor a reasonable balance between the commercial, the cultural and the diplomatic goals. Indeed, and although allegedly both the Bureau Export and the Institut Français work hand in hand to disseminate and promote French popular music abroad, the reality seems to contradict this 'entente'. As we have seen, the BE serves the majors' interests while the IF's role is to support more independent artists, supposedly in an attempt to guarantee cultural diversity, both at home and abroad. This logic of complementarity is not universal though. In countries where the Bureau Export has an office, most matters relating to music are usually dealt with by the Bureau Export and not by the French Institute as is the case in the United Kingdom. This seems reasonable, insofar as it is intended to avoid duplication, but it also indicates that diplomatic institutions (without corporate interests), when they are able to, delegate much of their responsibility to the music business. This also confirms that music diplomacy has gradually become an area dependant, if not subordinated, to the music industry's agenda<sup>41</sup>.

Nonetheless, this all-market perspective is not universal, and one can clearly observe the geo-strategic goals of French popular music diplomacy in the support delivered to African music by the IF and RFI, especially in Francophone African countries—and in the Caribbean—, which are still a priority for France in terms of cooperation, development and influence. As Françaix stated, RFI's music is programmed using only aesthetic and political criteria. If we look at the role still played by RFI in Francophone Africa (Fiedler and Frère 2016), this strategy of editorial freedom seems to be successful, and confirms Schneider's view (2003) that cultural diplomacy only works when it is free from a clear political agenda, when it truly shows diversity and autonomy from governments. In fact, by relying on its relative editorial autonomy, RFI both promotes Francophone popular music and cultural diversity while also helping to maintain traditional French cultural, political as well as economic ascendancy in the region. In this respect, it is interesting to note that many African music artists end up signing with French record companies, as noticed by Van Derpoorter (see previous section) (Amadou & Mariam, Tinariwen, Khaled and Ismael Lo

among many others). French music industry is then eventually responsible for their diffusion in France and abroad, precisely via the Bureau Export.

In light of the above, it seems fair to observe that in the context of French international relations, popular music nowadays is first and foremost considered a commodity. Aside from the noticeable exception of RFI, in general terms, it can be argued that popular music diplomacy has turned into a category within commercial diplomacy, into an instrument for boosting exports of 'made in France' music. This could be considered as yet another argument which confirms France's participation in global neoliberalism, where culture's value is not primarily aesthetic—or even ideological—but above all, commercial.

However, if that is so, other questions still arise when discussing French music diplomacy: What do the Daft Punk patriotic parade and the Elysée techno party tell us about the use of music in international relations? Is RFI a smart detour for promoting African artists signed with French record companies? Or mainly a way to maintain a form of cultural control over French former colonies? Aside from supporting the music industry, what exactly does the Ministry of Foreign Affairs want to achieve for France's international influence when promoting Charlotte Gainsbourg or Carla Bruni, and when helping African musicians in programmes such as Equationmusique? Is there a real diplomatic strategy behind the organisation of international tours, the financial support for emerging artists, the diffusion of 24-hour Francophone music? Or is it just a sum of uncoordinated efforts with no definite purpose? Obviously, there cannot be a straightforward answer to these questions. There are too many actors and interests at stake, both public (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Economy) and private (the industry, the artists themselves). In this ongoing oscillation between cultural promotion, national representation and market competition in the globalised context, there seems to be a glimpse of a strategy, salient in Macron's use of popular music in public events, but also visible in other actions of the diplomatic network.

Indeed, as we saw in the examples of Fête Nationale and Fête de la musique, the focus on French musical successes on a global scale challenged passéiste representations of France's public image, offering an innovative, modern one instead, thus meeting the strategic challenges of French diplomacy<sup>42</sup>. Actually, one can today observe a predominance of pop and electronic music, consistent with the music which is also more popular both in France and in international markets. In fact, '*chanson*', which frequently used to be employed as a synonym of French popular music, seems to have been replaced by 'French Touch', a much more contemporary, 'trendy' label<sup>43</sup>. This shift in musical style can also be observed in a shift in the language used. *Chanson* was inconceivable if not sung in French, whereas a large percentage of French music, consumed in France and especially exported, is now sung in English (The Do, Kungs, David Guetta, Justice, Air, Charlotte Gainsbourg, etc.)<sup>44</sup>.

The question of the (re)presentation of national identity through music is paramount here. On the one hand, the music circulated does not present any aesthetic or linguistic features which can define it as French. In fact, the common factor is that all the artists are, as Bureau Export would argue, 'Made in France'. English is used precisely to reach international audiences and, paradoxically, to sound less French at home and abroad. On the other hand, however, the Frenchness of the music is stressed through nomenclature of the events promoted by the diplomatic network (French Touch, French Miracle Tour, Whatthefrance, So Frenchy so Chic, Oui Love, etc.). Thus, French identity portrayed by popular music is one which both proudly shows its national origins while resolutely denying its traditions.

The concept of Frenchness is used here as a marketing argument for the nation branding strategy. It is indeed stressed because, traditionally for French public diplomacy, Frenchness amounts to Arts and Culture, to Enlightenment, to Human Rights, to Democracy, to everything which made France worthy of universal *rayonnement*<sup>45</sup>. But it also stands for deluxe products, charm, gastronomy, 'savoir vivre', etc. These traditional qualities, and clichés, and the products which represent them, are thus put to use to promote popular music. Yet, the new music used by French diplomacy is also associated with a new set of attributes, consistent with the new state of international relations and with neoliberal politics in France and in the world: modernity, coolness, trendiness, technology, market success, and globality are favoured over tradition, conservatism, nostalgia, protectionism and nationalism. Moreover, the traditional conflict between art and commerce, and between the French and the Anglo-American approaches to cultural policies<sup>46</sup> seem outdated, mainly because culture is now unconceivable without its commercial value. These are the values which France's diplomacy now primarily tries to convey and to stress, while attempting to preserve the 'traditional' and/or 'cliché' Frenchness which still holds influence abroad. And for this purpose, French mainstream popular music, for the most part assimilated with global trends, is a privileged tool, for it contributes to creating the 'start-up' nation dreamed of by President Macron and his immediate predecessors: a nation of successful entrepreneurship evolving in an open neoliberal environment, which challenges some of the country's most central values while showing a clear allegiance to national symbols such as the importance of culture and France's international *grandeur*. According to this logic, contemporary France, as the Fête de la musique techno in 2018 proved, is asked to look at itself in the mirror of its music,—the music which has been chosen to (re)present it—, a music which has lost most of its 'national' essence (though not completely), which is supposed to be cosmopolitan, attractive, young and cool, and which is ready to leave behind the accordion and even the language of Molière in order to stay in the race for international influence and appeal. French music diplomacy, which is now attached to commercial diplomacy, rather than performing the nation, is indeed contributing to the creation of a new France, home and abroad. This new France has firmly left behind the notion of art for art's sake; instead, it has opted for a more pragmatic, instrumental approach to culture and music in the hope it will be more efficient in the competition for international influence. Its success (or lack thereof) is a new song yet to be sung.

## Notes

1. See Fosler-Lussier (2012), Gienow-Hecht (2012), Von Eschen (2006).
2. See the list provided by the Institute for Cultural Diplomacy [http://www.culturaldiplomacy.org/academy/index.php?en\\_acts-of-music-as-cultural-diplomacy](http://www.culturaldiplomacy.org/academy/index.php?en_acts-of-music-as-cultural-diplomacy), and also the list.
3. See two recent academic events on the subject: 'Sons et voix de la scène internationale: comprendre les diplomaties musicales', international conference organised by Sciences Po, Paris, April 2016; 'Popular music and Public Diplomacy', international conference organised by University of Dortmund, on November 2015.
4. Among the rich bibliography on international relations and music, other than the aforementioned references, the special issues of *Relations Internationales* (2013) should be noticed as well as recent publications by Ramel (2018) and by Ramel and Prévost-Thomas (2018).
5. Popular music can be characterised as the product of an industry, consumed, actively or passively by large populations, and based on recording techniques and not on musical score.

Thus, it is a vast and complex category which can refer to very different musical styles including electronica, salsa, rap and hard rock. In English, this nomenclature and classification have been widely accepted both in everyday use and in academia. Popular music has been the object of Popular Music Studies, an academic discipline known as such since the 1980s. For an introduction to Popular Music Studies see Bennett, Shank and Toynbee 2005. French Popular Music Studies started developing later but the field has now become established. For an introduction to French Popular Music Studies, see Looseley (2003) and more recently Guibert and Rudent (2018).

6. The programme also included rock-and-roll, blues and folk ambassadors (Fosler-Lussier 2015, 143–165).
7. In French, the expression ‘popular music’ can be translated by ‘*musiques actuelles*’, which is the official nomenclature used by the Ministère de la Culture et le Ministère de l’Europe et des Affaires étrangères. This nomenclature shows that French institutions are still reluctant to translate the concept directly from the English language. This reveals also a will to set French popular music apart from globalised popular music, in what can be seen as a form of cultural protectionism or cultural exceptionalism. However, the term ‘*musiques populaires*’ is also used by French academics. See, for instance, *Volume! La revue des musiques populaires*, one of the main publications in the field in France for more than a decade now.
8. David Looseley has extensively explored the discourses attached to French popular music, namely *chanson*, often associated with the figure of the ACI (auteur-compositeur-interprète), epitomised by the famous trio Brel, Brassens, Ferré, one which is associated with the attributes of the ‘auteur’, a true artist, genuinely French, as opposed to mere entertaining music imports. See, for instance Looseley (2013) and Looseley (2018).
9. Modernisation and internationalisation are key concepts in Macron’s programme for the general election in 2017. The complete programme is available here: <https://storage.googleapis.com/en-marche-fr/COMMUNICATION/Programme-Emmanuel-Macron.pdf>.
10. Most French press covered the event, noticing its ‘novelty’ and ‘cool’ attitude but also the awkwardness of the situation. See for example: <http://www.lefigaro.fr/politique/le-scan/2018/06/22/25001-20180622ARTFIG00066-un-concert-de-musique-electronique-a-l-elysee.php>.
11. The performance is accessible here: [http://www.lemonde.fr/international/video/2017/07/14/14-juillet-la-fanfare-reprend-daft-punk-sous-les-yeux-amuses-de-macron-et-meduses-de-trump\\_5160804\\_3210.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/international/video/2017/07/14/14-juillet-la-fanfare-reprend-daft-punk-sous-les-yeux-amuses-de-macron-et-meduses-de-trump_5160804_3210.html).
12. See Poirrier’s compendium and comments on French cultural policies 2016. In English, see the excellent reader compiled by Jeremy Ahearne (2002). David Looseley (1995) provides an insightful analysis on the cultural policy debate in France.
13. See Ahearne (2014).
14. The cultural and creative sectors represent directly 43 billion euros, that is 2.3% of French economy, while their indirect weight has been estimated at 87 billion euros (Picard 2017).
15. Such is the case of Francecreative, an association of French cultural and creative agents which stresses the value of culture in the economy and asks for governmental support.
16. The term ‘*rayonnement*’, literally ‘radiation’, is now used with the term ‘influence’, which has less patronising connotations. The official term for referring to soft power diplomacy is nowadays ‘*diplomatie d’influence*’, ‘diplomacy of influence’.
17. French cultural hegemony and its ‘global’ prestige should be questioned or at least nuanced when it comes to French former colonies.
18. See <https://softpower30.com/country/france/>. Whether this is accurate or not, President Macron’s role in France’s new image and nation branding is undeniable.
19. For a review on French cultural diplomacy, see Lane (2016): 15–26.
20. As early as 1920, a rapport for French Senate identifies culture and science as a strong weapon for creating international influence. See Haize (2013): 1.
21. My translation: ‘Musique, cinéma, littérature, arts graphiques constituent, dans une économie globalisée, un véritable soft power français, pour nos exportations, notre influence’ (in Ernst&Young 2015).

22. In the 1990s and in 2000s, the GATT and WTO negotiations exemplify the firm defence of French cultural industries' interests by French governments (Buchsbbaum 2006).
23. Website of the MEAE <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/the-ministry-and-its-network/mini-try-for-europe-and-foreign-affairs-implementing-agencies/>.
24. I tried unsuccessfully to interview Olivier Delpoux, the person responsible for popular music and jazz at the IF. When I contacted the IF in London about their activities related to music, they redirected me directly to the Bureau Export, a semi-public body which will be presented in the next section. My last attempt to interview the responsible for 'Pôle spectacle vivant et musiques' (January 2019) has also been unsuccessful. I ignore the reasons behind this institutional silence, and I can only guess it might be due to a lack of interest in disseminating the IF's work on the field, and a tendency to keep state and diplomatic affairs hidden from the public.
25. Annual reports are accessible online: <http://www.institutfrancais.com/fr/rapport-d-activite>.
26. For instance, *Cargo 92*, a project financed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the City of Nantes, in which several modern theatre companies and a popular music band (La Mano Negra) toured the Americas following Christophe Coulomb's first voyage.
27. The interview was conducted in February 2016 by Michael Spanu in the context of his doctorate research. He kindly shared it with me for the purposes of this article. Parts of this interview are published in his PhD dissertation (Spanu 2017).
28. See the latest 'Projet annuel de performances' for the 'Programme 185', [https://www.performance-publique.budget.gouv.fr/sites/performance\\_publicue/files/farandole/ressources/2018/pap/pdf/DBGPGMPGM185.pdf](https://www.performance-publique.budget.gouv.fr/sites/performance_publicue/files/farandole/ressources/2018/pap/pdf/DBGPGMPGM185.pdf).
29. Institut Français website: <http://www.institutfrancais.com/en/new-music-and-jazz>.
30. See the Contrat d'Objectifs et de Moyens de l'Institut Français pour la période 2017–2019, Objectif 1.1.4. <https://www.senat.fr/rap/r16-419/r16-419-annexe.pdf>.
31. For example, French Miracle Tour in Asia showcasing French electronic artists in seven countries in Asia (<http://www.frenchmiracle.com/>). Other examples include the international tour provided for the winners of Les InrocksLab contest for young music artists, with the collaboration of the magazine *Les Inrocks* and the support to winners of FAIR contest on their international tour, a structure to boost careers and professionalisation in popular music.
32. The Workshop gathered professionals from the music industry and the diplomatic sector as well as scholars. All the presentations are available here: <https://ahc.leeds.ac.uk/centres-groups/doc/european-popular-musics>.
33. Vandepoorter was actually the person responsible for most events and actions regarding French music in the UK because the IF had handed over to the BE in London all its responsibilities in this respect.
34. For example, French rapper Oxmo Pucino, during his residence in Bogota worked with Colombian musicians and released an album as a result of this collaboration.
35. See, for instance, the festival So Frenchy so Chic, sponsored by Renault, in Australia, featuring French pop artists and food: <https://www.sofrenchysochic.com/melbourne/>.
36. The national stations and channels (France Télévisions and Radio France), because they can now be accessed via internet potentially everywhere, have multiplied the offer of French media worldwide.
37. The history of RFI goes hand in hand with that of colonisation and decolonisation.
38. For its present status and its future challenge in francophone African countries, see Fiedler and Frère (2016).
39. I did ask Français if this was the actual term he wanted to use, and he confirmed it, because in his view it described this music as opposed to Western, 'cold', musics.
40. RFI's main mission still is the diffusion of French culture in the world: 'Une offre de services de radio en français et en langues étrangères destinés en particulier aux auditoires étrangers, y compris ceux résidant en France, ainsi qu'aux Français résidant à l'étranger, chargés de contribuer à la diffusion de la culture française et d'assurer une mission d'information relative à l'actualité française, européenne et internationale'. Décret n° 2012–85 du 25 janvier 2012,

accessible online: <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=LEGITEXT000025199485&dateTexte=20181125> .

41. Jean-Jacques Garnier, director of the Institut Français in Tokyo, asserts this very clearly in an interview quoted by Spanu in his thesis: 'the main goal is, however, in the realm of cultural industries, whether books, music, cinema, and even video-games, to gain more market shares for French products in the target country' ('le but du jeu, quand même, dans le domaine des industries culturelles, qu'elles soient livre, musique, cinéma et même jeux vidéo, si on les rajoute, ça doit déboucher sur des augmentations des parts de marchés des produits français dans le pays' Jean 2013 as quoted in Spanu (2017): 97.
42. See the 'Contrat d'Objectifs et de Moyens pour l'Institut Français', *ibid.* p. 3.
43. Carla Bruni's latest album is precisely titled *French Touch* (2017). Certified 'Platine' in the international market, all songs are cover versions of 'classical' international pop hits. Here, the only Frenchness is that of the singer.
44. This would lead us to the complex question of national identity and 'nationality' in music, to which I can only refer to very briefly. For more on this subject, see Spanu (2017).
45. Obviously, this is a one-sided view on France values, which does not take into account the 'shadows' of French Republic.
46. In his comparative study of French and British popular culture policies, Looseley shows that there is no stark opposition between France and Great Britain in that respect (Looseley 2011).

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