

Every music album constitutes a fragment of a larger story about our shared present and past. The covers, titles, and selected repertoires are no coincidence – they construct a rich and multidimensional vision of history. This project explores how the recording industry tells stories about Early Music – European art music composed before 1750. It focuses on recordings of works from three key musical traditions between 1450 and 1650: the Franco-Flemish, Venetian, and German schools.

These labels are widely used to discuss the European musical past and represent core repertoires for both professional and amateur musicians today, making them ideal for exploring the relationship between academic knowledge and the recording industry. In music historiography, a ‘school’ typically refers to a group of musicians linked by a shared center, institution, composer, or style. This concept offers a valuable lens for investigating how the recording industry and musicology organize musical works and their creators into coherent frameworks.

By analyzing music albums produced from the 1940s to the present, the project uncovers how musicians and producers shape ideas about music history. Unfortunately, these ideas are often overlooked in academic studies of Early Music. The research fills this gap by treating music albums as multimedia objects that combine sound, design, and cultural contexts.

The project focuses on six key words: taxonomy (how music is categorized), geography (the importance of place of the record production), selection (what is included or excluded), urban iconography (the use of the most tourist destinations in cover design), confession (how the religious connotation of music can be communicated through music albums), and identity (cultural significance).

To achieve its goals, the research involves a comparative analysis of a large number (around 2,000 albums) of Early Music recordings from i.a. Europe, the US, Canada, and Japan. Research stays are planned in major European music centers, to gather material from libraries across Europe, including Berlin, Brussels, London, Paris, Prague, Rome, and Venice. While the dataset is extensive, the focus on six themes helps manage its complexity and provides insights into how recordings construct historical narratives. The recordings will be thoroughly examined, not only for their musical content but also for their textual elements (titles, liner notes, and other paratexts) and visual aspects (cover design). The visual layer is especially important in shaping the meanings associated with albums. Studies on popular music recordings have shown that cover design plays a crucial role in their reception and commercial success. Despite its importance, the cover design of Early Music albums has received little scholarly attention. By analyzing titles, motifs, and iconographic sources, the project aims to show that even seemingly conventional cover designs can reveal much about the cultural codes employed by music producers. This holistic approach treats the materiality of albums as just as significant as their music.

The project will result in four academic articles and an international conference to bring together musicians, scholars, and producers. These efforts aim to bridge the gap between academic research and the world of early music recordings. Ultimately, the project emphasizes that recordings do more than preserve music – they shape our understanding of history, identity, and culture.