



Early Music

REVIVALS

& the Origins of Musicology

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How did the study of music's past become a discipline in its own right?

Dr Jeremy Coleman investigates the 18th and 19th-century roots of musicology, when antiquarians, historians, and performers across Europe began treating old music as cultural heritage. His research reveals how early revivals, historical concerts, and scholarly traditions shaped not only what we hear today, but also how we perceive the history of Western music.



The modern discipline of musicology, and our very idea of 'music history', took shape between 1770 and the mid-19th century. This was a pivotal period when historians, antiquarians, and performers began to study and revive older music in new ways, laying the groundwork for how we understand and perform the past today. However, what if we looked not just at the history of music, but at the history of music history itself? What if we looked at how the story of Western music was constructed in the first place?

This is the main focus of Dr Jeremy Coleman's ongoing research. A musicologist and pianist, Coleman lectures in the Music Studies Department at UM's School of Performing Arts, where he also serves as Area Director for Research. His work centres on the historical study of music. This involves tracing manuscripts, printed sources, and forgotten repertoires to make them accessible and performable today. He is particularly interested in how the story of Western music has been shaped by the way it is taught as well as how textbooks and scholarly traditions construct a sequence, a narrative of progress, and a version of history that has come to define what we know as 'music history'.

Focusing on the origins of historical thinking about music, Coleman explores how early scholars and performers began to treat music as something to be researched, preserved, and reinterpreted. He examines how the revival of early music during this period was tied to broader cultural ideas about

history, identity, authenticity, and how performance itself became a form of historical understanding. At this time, and in this process, the act of playing old music was also an act of rediscovery.

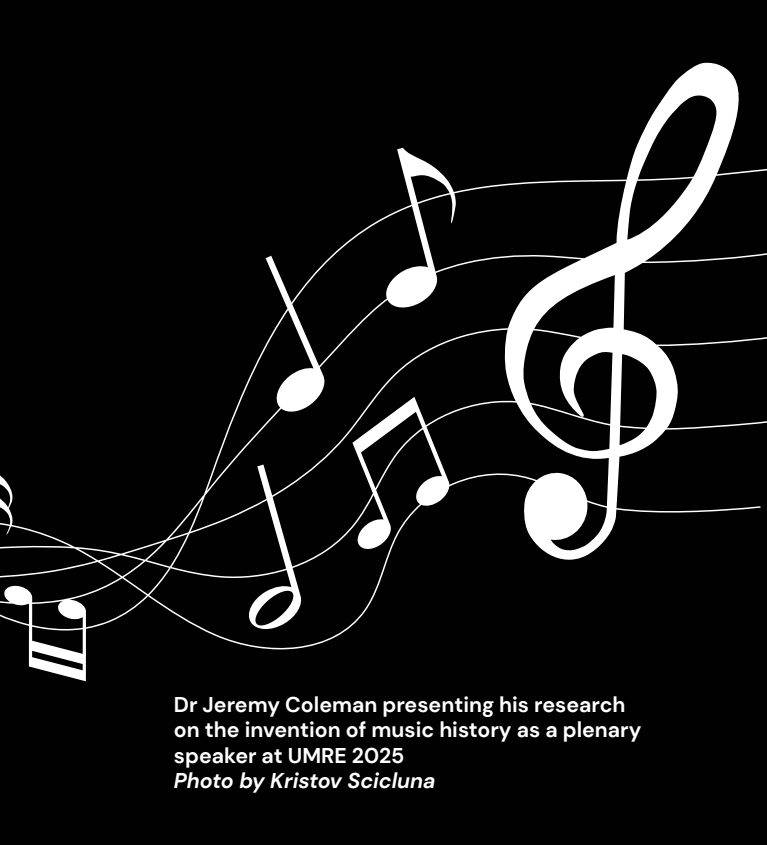
THE PAST AS A PATH FORWARD

In his ongoing work, Coleman traces how the modern idea of music history emerged from the practices of 18th-century antiquaries, early collectors and cataloguers. These people were unlike traditional historians in that they were less concerned with writing narratives than with preserving the physical traces of the past. Their influence shaped the musical culture of the late 18th century – a time marked by uncertainty as to where music was heading.

Amid Enlightenment ideals and political upheaval, patrons, aristocrats, and composers alike began looking to earlier works to legitimise power, glorify royal lineage, and find artistic direction. For composers, 'it was becoming increasingly meaningful to look to the past to find a way forward,' Coleman describes it.

This impulse gave rise to the notion of 'ancient' music, embodied in concert series such as London's Concerts of Ancient Music (1776 – mid-19th century), which celebrated George Frideric Handel and inspired similar initiatives across Europe.

Tracing this evolution into the 19th century, Coleman's research highlights figures such as François-Joseph Fétis in Paris and Brussels and Felix Mendelssohn



Dr Jeremy Coleman presenting his research on the invention of music history as a plenary speaker at UMRE 2025
Photo by Kristov Scicluna



in Berlin and Leipzig. Both pioneered 'historical concerts' that presented music chronologically, from Renaissance pieces to contemporary works. In this way, they transformed audiences' engagement with history from reading about it to hearing it.

'It had a lot to do with novelty. The old turned out to be new. There was a hunger for more musical variety as the repertoire had become too narrow in style and performance. There is this paradoxical idea of people looking to the past to find novelty – not out of nostalgia, but in search of innovation,' Coleman explains.

By comparing these movements across cultural contexts, the study shows how ideas and methods circulated between France, Germany, and beyond. The early music revival was hence not just a series of isolated efforts but a shared European phenomenon. The study also examines historical concert practices in relation to how history books were being written at the time, exploring how narrative itself functions as a kind of literary construction – not merely a collection of facts, but a creative and dynamic process.

Coleman further reflects on how ideas from this period continue to shape the way we think about music today. We still live with the concept of 'early music' – the idea of a musical heritage that fell out of the performance tradition and had to be revived. This revival involves a musicological process of looking back at sources to understand what composers originally intended, especially as musical notation and performance practices have changed over time.

What once referred to Medieval or Renaissance works has since expanded to include music from as late as the 19th century. This shows how flexible and enduring this category has become.

RETHINKING THE 'HISTORICAL CONCERT'

During his sabbatical in the second semester of 2024, following work which had begun intermittently since early 2023, Coleman conducted extensive archival research in Brussels and Vienna. This period proved especially productive, allowing him to collaborate with other musicologists and archivists who directed him towards previously overlooked sources.

In Vienna, his research focused on the Austrian National Library and the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde archives. There, his primary interest lay in the figure of Raphael Georg Kiesewetter, a prominent Austrian scholar often regarded as a counterpart, or even a rival, to François-Joseph Fétis. Both men were early music antiquarians, deeply engaged in collecting and studying sources of early music. Both played pivotal roles in shaping the emerging discipline of music historiography. Kiesewetter is particularly significant for having written one of the first concise histories of Western music, originally published in German in 1834. Coleman also explores the contributions made by women, both to music historiography and to 'historical' performance practice during this time. For instance, the French writer, singer and composer Alexandrine- ➤

Sophie de Bawr published a single-volume history of music in 1823, expressly for a readership of women.

One of the more revealing findings to emerge from Coleman's research concerns the origins and usage of the term 'historical concerts'. In much of the scholarship written over the past fifty years, the phrase has been employed rather freely to describe 19th-century revivalist projects. Nonetheless, a closer examination complicates this assumption.

While Fétis appears to have used, and quite possibly coined the term, very few of his contemporaries adopted it. Mendelssohn used it occasionally, and it has sometimes been attributed to Kiesewetter, although, as far as current evidence suggests, Kiesewetter himself never employed it.

Some modern accounts even claim that 'historical concerts' took place as early as the mid-17th century. Such attributions reveal the extent to which the concept is, in fact, a 20th-century construction, retrospectively projected onto a variety of 19th-century revivalist endeavours.

At the time, the word *historical* carried broader connotations. It did not merely mean 'old', but also evoked a sense of story or narrative – a nuance that Fétis himself seemed to have embraced when using the term *historique*.

PERFORMANCE AUTHENTICITY AND IMAGINATION

One area still requiring further investigation is the case of instruments. More specifically, how these relate to early approaches to what would later be called 'historically informed performance'.

The modern notion of authenticity, which relates to performing works on period instruments and employing historically accurate techniques, is a 20th-century ideology. By contrast, in the early 19th century, figures such as Mendelssohn, who famously revived Bach's music, typically performed on contemporary instruments such as the modern piano.

'Fétis, on the other hand, claimed to perform on original instruments, although this is open to question,' declares Coleman. 'Moreover, Fétis frequently composed pieces for his "historical concerts" in the style of earlier composers, presenting them as the work of others. In this sense, there is an element of forgery at play – not

a pursuit of literal fidelity to the original, but rather the creation of an imaginative fantasy of the past.'

In parallel with this research, Coleman is also involved in a related but distinct initiative – an EU-funded networking project titled *EarlyMuse*, part of the COST Actions programme. This project examines the place of early music and musicology more broadly, within European cultural and heritage policy. It seeks to explore how music historiography can be promoted at a European level, how musicology can play a more visible role within cultural institutions, and lastly, to what extent musicologists have engaged with European funding frameworks.

Alongside his academic work, Coleman remains active as a pianist, collaborating in opera classes and preparing a series of upcoming recitals. These experiences continue to inform his scholarly perspective and may develop into future research projects, particularly concerning the relationship between performance practice and historical inquiry. **T**



Document reference, Library of the Royal Conservatory of Brussels, B-Bc, FA-IV-304: *La musique de XVIIe siècle, à l'église, au concert et au bal : concert historique : donné par M. Fétis : à la Salle du Grand Concert, le 3 Décembre 1836 : programme* (Brussels: Ode and Wodon, [1836]), title page.