

Méi-Ra St-Laurent: "It's kind of in the middle": The 'Mid-Fi' Aesthetic: Toward a New Designation of Black Metal Aesthetic of Recording. The Case of the Québec Black Metal Scene

Citation:

Laurent, M.-R. (2019). "It's kind of in the middle": The 'Mid-Fi' Aesthetic: Toward a New Designation of Black Metal Aesthetic of Recording. The Case of the Québec Black Metal Scene. In Gullö, J.O., Rambarran, S., & Isakoff, K., (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 12th Art of Record Production Conference Mono: Stereo: Multi* (pp. 267-286). Stockholm: Royal College of Music (KMH) & Art of Record Production.

Abstract

The designation of the black metal sound as “lo-fi” by academics is problematic, since it doesn’t reflect the contemporary black metal production. Fieldwork in the Québec scene show that the members designate their sound as being “in the middle” – or mid-fi as I advocate it. In this paper, I first define “hi-fi”, “lo-fi”, “authenticity” and “mid-fi” in the context of black metal. Then, I present different black metal sound aesthetic using audio extracts, frequency analysis, spectrogram images and ethnographic data. This analysis allow better qualify black metal aesthetic production today using the Québec scene as an example.

Introduction

Between April 2015 and December 2017, I conducted nineteen ethnographic interviews with twenty-five members of the black metal scene in the province of Québec (Canada) as a part of my doctoral thesis in musicology¹. From the first interviews, I realized that the members of the scene described their sound aesthetics as neither lo-fi nor hi-fi. This aesthetic designation of the “in-between”, which I came to designate as “mid-fi” – a term I will define in this paper – seemed to reveal two paradigm shifts in the aesthetic production of black metal.

First of all, this change in the aesthetic designation challenges the very way in which the style has been understood so far by academics. Indeed, this subgenre of extreme metal, developed in the late 1980s, is linked to the lo-fi

¹ My doctoral thesis is about the phonographic and identity-based narrative of the black metal scene in Québec.

aesthetic of the first Norwegian black metal bands of the 1990s². It has also been described by scholars as having a minimal, raw, ugly, amateur and noisy sound production (Reyes: 2013; Thompson: 2012; Hainaut: 2012; Hagen: 2011). However, it has to be said that many groups have moved away from these standards over the last twenty years and that the mere “lo-fi” designation is no longer sufficient to describe today’s black metal sound. Secondly, this dissociation from the lo-fi aesthetic is present in the music of many contemporary black metal bands (namely Cult of Fire, Mgła and Batushka) and also suggests that the type of aesthetic production chosen does not seem to have the same importance that it previously had in determining the authenticity of the music, a fundamental value in black metal, since its inception. But before elaborating, it is necessary to ask the following questions: how has the aesthetic production of black metal evolved since the 1990s? What does “mid-fi” refer to? And can we really use this term to describe the sound aesthetics of Québec’s black metal bands?

To be able to better categorize the aesthetic used by Québec’s scene, I will first define the notions of fidelity, hi-fi, lo-fi and authenticity, while considering the discourse of the Québec scene’s members about these elements. I will also offer a provisional definition of the term mid-fi. Secondly, I will take a closer look inside the black metal sound production from its beginnings until today by focusing on both lo-fi and hi-fi productions, including those from Québec. To do so, I will use sound excerpts, frequency analysis and spectrograms of the targeted recordings. In the last section of the paper, I will explore how the technological changes affected the way the production standards of black metal are now understood by members of the Québec scene.

Defining the basic vocabulary

Before machines could reproduce sound, the term “fidelity” had a very fluid meaning (Sterne: 2003, p. 216). As Jonathan Sterne indicates, its first use dates back to the end of the 19th century and:

[it] indicates both a faith in media and a belief in media that can hold faith, a belief that media and sounds themselves could hold faithfully to the agreement that two sounds are the same sound. (Sterne: 2003, p. 222)

² However, more recently, Podoshen et al. argued that: “The production of black metal music can range from very slick – with attention paid to highlighting the intricate musicianship of band members to muddier, dirge-like production, with churning riffs and unearthly vocals, to the lo-fidelity, harsh and tinny production in guitars, drums and vocals seen from underground black metal bands” (2017, p.4). Not coming from a musicological or sound production field of study, this nuanced posture advocated by authors is quite new in the academic discourse and echoed to a certain extent the results I have obtained in my own fieldwork.

In other words, in a context where people were still in the process of understanding the relationship between sounds made by humans and those reproduced by machines, a faithful sound meant that it could be understood as “worthy of faith” (p. 274). Rather than focussing on a particular sound aesthetic, sound fidelity was more concerned with reproducing, to the best extent possible, a performance. Alternatively, it was also concerned with distinguishing the sonic features emanating from various machines and technologies (2003: p. 274-275).

According to Yannick Lapointe, the term “high fidelity”, commonly known as “hi-fi”, appeared in the 1930s³, where the junction of these two words suggested the desire to be “highly faithful to something” (2012: p.18)⁴. Dario Rudy and Yves Citton also explain that a hi-fi recording is often conceived as equivalent to the live performance, where the recording is then understood to be “true” and “authentic”, capturing the intentions of the composer (Ruby and Citton: 2014, p.113). The notion of “liveness” also remains important for Aden Evens, who adds that “[high fidelity] is achieved by the accurate recreation of the same pattern of sound waves at the listener’s body as would have occurred at the body of a listener who was present at the recording” (Evans: 2005, p.10).

Moreover, the concept of low fidelity (“lo-fi”) originated at the beginning of the 19th century, where an interest in imperfect, rough, simple sounds can be understood as a reaction to Enlightenment aesthetics (privileging perfection and balance). During the 19th century until the beginning of the 20th century, we saw the development of primitivism, romanticism and realism, functioning as a negation of the conventions of musical composition of this period (Harper: 2014, p. 63). In the second part of the 20th century, the desire to reject social conventions with the help of music was also reflected in the folk revival, the rock of the counterculture and independent (indie) rock music. Later, in the 1980s, even though technical imperfections were often understood as a guarantee of more authenticity, an appreciation for sound imperfections was rare (2014: p. 378). Indeed, as Harper points out:

[punk] favoured ‘rawness’ and a disrespect for technocratic convention, but performance imperfections and phonographic imperfections ran the risk of compromising the all-important intensity of the music. (Harper: 2014, p. 377-378)

³ As Lapointe pointed out, the term “hi-fi” (as well as the term “lo-fi”) can be linked with many significations. It can refer to the sound system, recording devices, and can also be understood as an adjective (e.g. hi-fi/lo-fi equipment, hi-fi/lo-fi phonogram or hi-fi/music) or even an aesthetic conception (Lapointe: 2012, p.19-26). In this paper, the latter signification will be privileged.

⁴ Citation translated from French by the author of this paper.

It was truly in the 1990s that lo-fi was recognized as a category, particularly with indie rock and grunge, and it was linked with the disillusionment of society felt by Generation X (2014, p. 378).

Then, for Harper

Lo-fi as it is normally understood is less a genre or mode of music-making than a confluence (*rencontre*), in the reception of certain recordings, of various aesthetic currents that run through the late-twentieth and early twenty-first century – known under further headings such as primitivism, realism, postmodernism and archaism – and their manifestation in the changing relation of portable magnetic-tape-recording technology to the wider landscape of music-technological (and particularly industrial) production. (Harper: 2014, p.5)

This specific sound aesthetic is often linked to a set of unwanted noises that he calls “lo-fi effects”, such as harmonic distortion⁵, tape hiss, the noise of unplugged cables during the performance (2014, p.23), performance noises (e.g. mouth clicks), or the environmental noises (e.g. unwanted voices in the background) (2014, p.23-27).

Kromhout also focussed on the way the lo-fi production was understood by the media and artists. He explains:

[...] for Pitchfork, the term lo-fi also refers to a loose genre or conglomerate of genres: artists who deliberately reject the standards of hi-fidelity (polished, crispy, clear, ‘accurate’ sound) and share a recording aesthetic focused less on the most accurate recording. Opposed to the ideal of absolute transparency of hi-fi, lo-fi aims at non transparency; it is noisy, ‘inaccurate’ and consciously establishing itself as a *recording*. (2009, p.1)⁶

This type of sound imperfection can be achieved using obsolete or broken equipment or by not using the proper recording device. However, Kromhout additionally pointed out that the term “lo-fi” remains more or less difficult to define, because there are

[...] many different kinds of lo-fi recordings and many different stages of lo-fidelity, from recordings completely drowned in noise to predominantly hi-fi recordings incorporating lo-fi elements. (2009, p.3)

⁵ According to Wadhams, harmonic distortion can be described as: “the unwanted addition (by an acoustic environment or electronic device) of harmonics of a pure tone when that tone is propagated in the environment or input to the device” (1988, p.65). Harper adds that: “it typically occurs when a signal is amplified beyond the dynamic range of a device – ‘overdriven’ or ‘overmodulated’ – and thus clipped” (2014, p.20; original emphasis).

⁶ Original emphasis.

To this, Harper adds that when referring to popular music, the sound quality of a recording cannot be fundamentally good or bad, nor lo-fi or hi-fi. Rather, it is understood as being good or bad in relation to the technological environment from which it arises (Harper: 2014, p.11-12).

However, as Université Laval's sound engineer Serges Samson pointed out during an interview, this classification of aesthetic productions may also differ depending on the style or genre. For example, the lo-fi production of blue grass remains difficult to compare with the lo-fi production of black metal, meaning that we must establish what is hi-fi and what is lo-fi for a specific style of music (Interview, October 30 2017). This also means that these aesthetic categories remain highly subjective, making it even more important to consider how they are understood by members of the various scenes.

Another important ingredient, which is present in both hi-fi and lo-fi aesthetics, is the notion of authenticity. More specifically, Allan Moore specifies that authenticity is not present in music as such but is created during the act of listening (2013, p. 265). Then, he adds, it must be seen as being "ascribed to" rather than "inscribed in" a recording or a performance (2002, p. 220). It must also be understood as "a matter of interpretation which is made and fought for from within a cultural and, thus, historicised position" (Moore: 2002, p. 210). Moreover, he explains that there are several types of authenticity. Authenticity can be used to reflect two elements, being the "purity of practice" or the "honesty in experience" (2002, p. 213). On the one hand, authenticity is related to purity when fans and musicians alike refer to the origin of something and see it as being genuine and more honest than the use of a contemporary musical language, which would rather participate in the disintegration of the musical style in question (Moore: 2013, p. 263). On the other hand, authenticity is linked with honesty, when it comes to a song understood as being unmediated, or composed "on the spot" (Moore, 2002, p. 213). For example, Norwegian black metal bands of the 1990s tend to associate themselves with Venom, an older band of the NWOBHM⁷, which dwells on punkish aesthetic, and is seen as an older and much simpler musical aesthetic than the death metal aesthetic (I will come back to this element).

Finally, authenticity is not always related to the sound. Indeed, it is also possible to speak about *social authenticity*, as Moore explains when a defined community legitimizes this value as a fundamental characteristic (Moore: 2002, p. 215). For example, in the context of black metal, Danish researchers Kuppens and van der Pol explain that this value is usually understood in the context of the black metal community as:

⁷ The New Wave of British Heavy Metal (NWOBHM) is a group of heavy metal bands emanating from Great Britain in the 1980s (e.g. Iron Maiden, Def Leppard, Motorhead and Venom).

[...] an absolute and inherent quality, [which] is never uncontested, but rather subject of a continual political struggle between parties who seek to ‘naturalize’ their particular definition of authenticity. (Kuppens et van der Pol: 2014, p.152)

This value can be used by the community to evaluate the discourse or to describe the persona or music of a band (2014, p. 152). In that case, even if “authenticity” must be understood as a social construction, it remains nonetheless a value to consider when qualifying the aesthetic of black metal.

Members of the black metal scene in Québec whom I interviewed⁸, described hi-fi and lo-fi in black metal using mostly the same vocabulary and concepts as the definition given above. For example, Fiel⁹ (drummer of Forteresse, the main band of the Québec scene) explained regarding lo-fi that: “The sound will be more boomy [...] and it’s going to reflect the sound that we can get with a tape recorder” (Ethnographic interview, November 2, 2017). They also pointed out the fact that neither one nor the other aesthetic production seems to characterize their sound. As Moribond (a founding member of Forteresse) added:

The lo-fi aesthetic still has its share of followers, but I find that there is a lot of modern projects that are venturing into the realm of higher production values (such is often the case within the “orthodox”¹⁰ black metal current, for example). In a way, this has brought to light the possibility of having a higher quality production without sacrificing the essence of black metal. (Ethnographic interview, November 2, 2017)

For his part, Thorleif (leader of the band Délétère), describes the sound of the scene as being a “lo-fi of quality”. While being perfectly aware of the pleonasm introduced with this expression, he keeps using it because he does not know how to designate this aesthetic choice (Ethnographic interview,

⁸ In Québec, the black metal scene was established in the mid-1990s. However, the lack of financial and promotional resources limited the development of the scene. It was only really in 2006 that a specific black metal scene was formed, when the Montreal label Sepulchral Productions signed three emerging black metal groups, namely Forteresse, Gris and Sombres Forêts. The members I have interviewed are emanating from a specific portion of the scene, known under the moniker of “métal noir québécois”, which came into use also around 2006. The groups belonging to this specific community are also using similar elements in their music, that is, French lyrics, references to the history and culture emanating from Québec, and incorporation of folk music in black metal songs. The community also advocates a sovereignist position regarding the future of the province and the main bands associated with this movement are Forteresse, Brume d’Automne and Chasse-Galerie (St-Laurent 2019. “Le métal noir québécois: Analyse du récit phonographique et identitaire d’une scène marginale”. To be published).

⁹ Pseudonyms have been used to designate the members of the scene who were interviewed in order to respect their anonymity.

¹⁰ The orthodox black metal current refers to black metal bands (e.g. Ofermod, Malign, Deathspell Omega and Watain) that are employing lyrical themes linked with satanism and occultism, while usually advocating an aesthetic sound production of higher quality.

December 16, 2016). Fans and musicians of the Québec scene, such as Stan (founder of the band Tsar Stangra), describe the aesthetic production of the Québec bands as being “kind of in the middle” and being “neither too dirty nor too clean” (Ethnographic interview, October 3, 2016). Finally, Moribond came to a similar conclusion when he told me:

Québec black metal bands are not going to be searching – the most important groups at least – for a super lo-fi sound, nor a super hi-fi sound. The most important for us is the texture and the ambiance that we are conveying on each recording. (Ethnographic interview, November 2, 2017)

It is after many discussions with members of the scene, academics and sound engineers, that I have come to use the term “mid-fi” to designate this aesthetic of the in-between characterizing the Québec scene. “Mid-fi” is not used in the academic literature surrounding metal music and sound production. However, this term is often employed in various audiophile forums to refer to recording equipment of good quality that is not overpriced. Therefore, I define “mid-fi” as a recording aesthetic of good fidelity, while not being completely free of sound imperfections, and that can satisfy most listeners. This preliminary definition also reflects the way most of the scene members in Québec conceive of their sound, as shown earlier.

In the following section, I explore the categorization of hi-fi and lo-fi productions in the context of black metal and examine to what extent it is possible to use the term mid-fi to qualify the Québec scene. To do this, I use frequency analysis and spectrogram images representing portions of the recordings considered to be significant. The frequency analysis will illustrate the frequency range at specific moments in selected excerpts and the spectrograms will be used to demonstrate the level of definition throughout the duration of chosen excerpts. These tools allow me to place each excerpt on a left-right axis referring to lo-fi and hi-fi aesthetic production.

The black metal context: exploring the lo-fi, hi-fi and mid-fi aesthetic sound production

As mentioned above, academics have defined the black metal style as belonging to lo-fi aesthetic production. When doing so, they often refer to the first recordings of the Norwegian black metal bands of the early 1990s, including the Darkthrone's *Transilvanian Hunger's* album. This album, recorded in 1994 at the Necrohell studio (Norway) using a four-track recorder, is often considered to be the lo-fi aesthetic reference for black metal fans. It has also been associated with the “necrosound” aesthetic, since the musicians wanted their sound to contrast as strongly as possible to the hi-fi aes-

thetic production used by technical death metal bands of that moment (Reyes: 2013, p.255; Aites and Ewell: 2009, 13:45). As explained by Reyes:

[black metal] pursued not just any kind of amateur, low-fidelity work. Rather, it reified only particular sounds, creating an ugly, raw, grim aesthetic specific to the dominant sensibilities of extreme metal at the time. (2013, p. 247)

By using this aesthetic, black metal bands also wanted to reproduce the sonority of the proto-black metal bands of the 1980s, which also used low-budget production (e.g. Venom, Bathory, Celtic Frost, etc.). These bands were also associated with a low-budget type of recording, since their albums were produced with minimal equipment and within a short time (Reyes: 2013, p.250).

Therefore, the first excerpt chosen for this analysis is “Transilvanian Hunger” from Darkthrone. When listening to this song¹¹, we notice that the sound is thin and that the spam of frequencies reproduced seems very small. The sound of the instruments, and particularly the drum, are characterized by the lack of sharpness of the attacks. The voice is positioned relatively at the back of the mix and is very distorted. According to Samson, this is probably due to the poor quality of the audio recording and the obsolete state of the recorder (Interview, November 7, 2017). The next image (figure 1) represents a screen capture of the frequency analysis of the targeted song, using

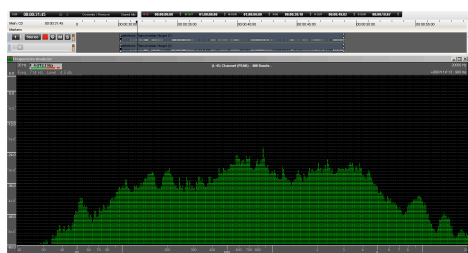


Figure 1: Frequency analysis image of an excerpt of “Transilvanian Hunger” from Darkthrone

400 band frequencies with Pyramix software. With each of these images I present only a specific portion of the excerpt, which appears at the top left corner (here the screen capture was taken at 31:45 seconds from the beginning). The horizontal axis represents the frequencies covered between 20 to 20000 Hz, and the vertical axis depicts the decibel level reached. I focus mainly

on the data presented on the horizontal axis. On this first image of the frequency analysis, we can see that the frequencies range between 150 and 5000 Hz (if we do not consider the normal slopes of the frequencies at both extremes). What is also interesting to mention is the presence of three larger spikes after 5 Kh. According to Samson, they can be related to sound arte-

¹¹ It is possible to listen to the song “Transilvanian Hunger” from Darkthrone through Youtube. The address is the following: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4iaj2w7Bp58>

facts¹², which are usually linked with a sonic error due to the restriction in the audio capture of a recording device (Interview, November 7, 2017).

To have a better idea of how this lo-fi aesthetic can be translated visually with each excerpt, I also used spectrogram images, realized with Sonic visualizer software. On these images (e.g. figure 2), the horizontal axis refers to the time progression in seconds, while the vertical axis indicates the frequencies (from 43 Hz to more than 20 kHz). The different colors used allow viewers to identify the energy level of certain frequencies. Thus, the yellow bands on the bottom refer to the frequencies most present in this excerpt. The irregular orange curves that can be seen in the lower right corner represent the vocal frequencies.

This first spectrogram image also informs us on the level of definition¹³. Indeed, the vertical lines – namely the transients –, which usually refer to guitars or cymbal attacks (as shown in the red oval) are not prominent. On the contrary, everything seems to be very smooth, which characterizes the absence of definition. Moreover, the faint lines that can be seen after 10 kHz are the artefacts that were discussed earlier. This spectrogram image is also typical of a black metal lo-fi aesthetic. Indeed, as Hainaut explained, black metal sound is highly defined by the settings of the guitars. Therefore, the high gain will tend to increase the upper partials of the sound, and consequently, the mid and lower frequencies will be less prominent. This will produce a highly homogeneous harmonic spectrum, where the energy will not be focused on specific formants but will be spread more uniformly across the spectrum – as it is shown in this first spectrogram image (2012, p.99).

If for many academics and sound producers, this production has been labeled as the example of all things you must not do when producing an album, for black metal fans, this is understood as an aesthetic statement of great importance. Thus, in the context of black metal, this type of aesthetic is often heard as being authentic, since it is intended for an audience of insiders, who understand its codes. Many black metal bands

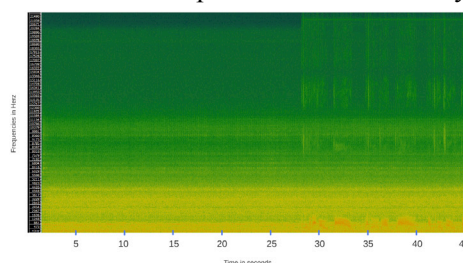


Figure 2: Spectrogram image of an excerpt of "Transilvanian Hunger" from Darkthrone



Figure 3: The place of Darkthrone's excerpt on the lo-fi/hi-fi axis

¹² Samson also points out that the presence of such artefacts is not necessarily the result of the recording process. Depending on if the song was digitalized afterwards, these artefacts could have appeared at the mastering stage (Interview, November 7, 2017).

¹³ "Definition" can be defined as the level of sharpness of an image.

today, such as Akitsa from Québec (e.g. *Grands tyrans*, 2015), continue to use this kind of low-budget/lo-fi aesthetic. Thus, given this information, I will position this excerpt on the extreme left side of my axis, as being an example of extreme lo-fi aesthetic in the black metal style (figure 3).

During the beginning of the 1990s, other groups of the Norwegian scene (e.g. Burzum, Emperor, Mayhem) recorded several albums that were also understood as being lo-fi by the black metal fans. However, they were slightly better produced than the Darkthrone excerpt I just presented. More specifically, these bands recorded their albums at the Grieghallen studio (Bergen, Norway), where they worked with sound engineer Eirik “Pytten” Hundvin.

The second excerpt, “I am the Black Wizards” comes from Emperor’s first album, *In the Nightside Eclipse*, recorded in 1994 with Pytten at Grieghallen Studio. The comparison of this excerpt with those of three other bands also produced by Pytten (namely Mayhem, Immortal and Burzum), reveals that the excerpt by Emperor seems to reflect the production aesthetics specific to these groups¹⁴. Listening this excerpt¹⁵, we can hear that the

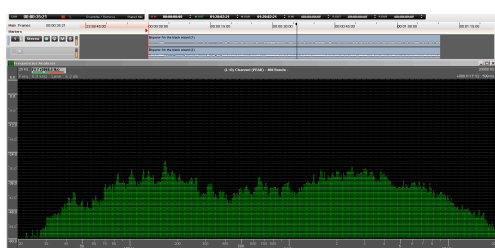


Figure 4: Frequency analysis image of an excerpt of “I am the Black Wizard” from Emperor.

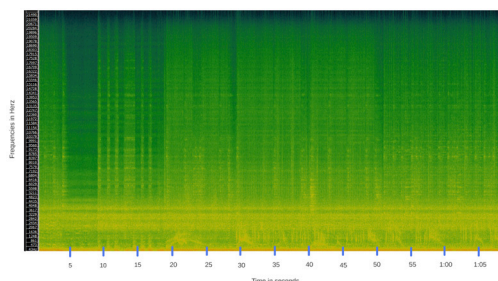


Figure 5: Spectrogram image of the excerpt of “I am a Black Wizard” from Emperor

production has a little bit more fidelity than the last one, since the lower frequencies are more prominent. We can also quite easily hear that all the instruments and their definition is greater (e.g. we can hear each cymbal attacks distinctively). However, the global sound remains muddy, which could be due to the omnipresence of reverb added on all the instruments.

The frequency analysis (figure 4) shows us that the frequency range is already much wider than the Darkthrone excerpt, extending from 80 to 8500 Hz, and where the curve is more regular, having a slight hollow between 300 Hz to

¹⁴ It’s important to note that the subsequent albums of these bands have shown a higher degree of fidelity, which can be due to several factors, such as the preferred aesthetic choices or even the greater experience of the musicians. For this analysis, I’m referring to the albums produced in the beginning of the 1990s, which better characterized the lo-fi sound we can hear during this period in Norway.

¹⁵ It is possible to listen to the song “I am the Black Wizards” (Emperor) using this Youtube link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YgQRR19goFg>

1 kHz in order to leave frequency room for the keyboard (which is featured later in the song).

The spectrogram (figure 5), meanwhile, confirms the greater definition mentioned before, which is immediately visible thanks to the many transients we can clearly see, and which represent cymbal attacks. We can still see a strengthening of the frequencies between 1000 and 3000 Hz, where the definition seems less present, due to the lack of sharpness of the transients.

Even if this production has a greater level of fidelity, the lack of data prevents us from classifying it definitively on the axis. In the meantime, I propose to understand this recording as an example of a well produced lo-fi and place it momentarily between the lo-fi and mid-fi poles (figure 6).

I now explore the other end of the spectrum. From the mid-1990s, black

metal began to be known outside of the underground scene and many other groups broadened its aesthetic production standards. Therefore, in the early 2000s, several black metal bands developed a sound production of a higher quality, as is exemplified by the Norwegian group Dimmu Borgir. Indeed, from the beginning of the 2000s, the group softened its black metal sound, even including a complete symphonic orchestra (e.g. *Death Cult Armageddon*, 2003). Many other bands also followed a similar tendency, such as Anorexia Nervosa (e.g. *New Obscurantis Order*, 2001) or Cradle of Filth (*Thornography*, 2006). The excerpt I chose for analysis, "Born Treacherous", comes from the most recent album of Dimmu Borgir, *Abrahadabra* (2010)¹⁶. When listening to the song, we can feel a more uniform distribution of all

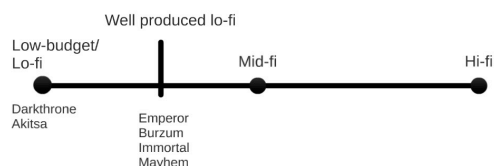


Figure 6: The place of Emperor on the lo-fi/hi-fi axis.

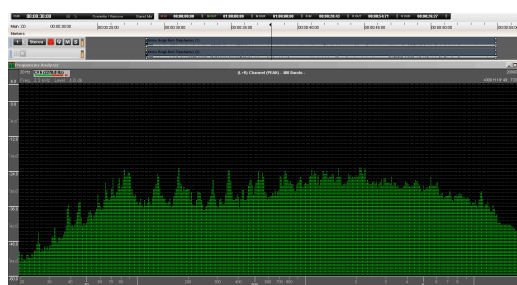


Figure 7: Frequency analysis image of "Born Treacherous" from Dimmu Borgir

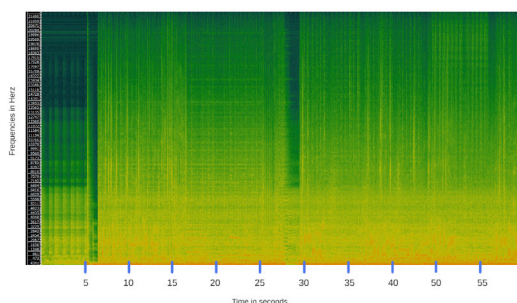


Figure 8: Spectrogram image of "Born Treacherous" from Dimmu Borgir.

¹⁶ It is possible to listen to the song "Born Treacherous" (Dimmu Borgir) using this Youtube link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6hjMg4OyAlw>

frequencies and especially a greater presence of the lower ones (e.g. the bass guitar is clearly heard compared to the previous examples).

Looking at the image of the frequency analysis (figure 7), we can identify a very large frequency range, from 80 Hz to 6 kHz, but with only a significant reduction at 10 kHz, which is more extended than with the two previous recordings. The peaks we can see in the left portion of the image refer to a strong attack on the bass guitar in the lower frequency range.

The spectrogram image (figure 8) clearly demonstrates distinct transients and a reinforcement of the mid-high frequencies up to 6 kHz. This image even allows us to distinguish the transients at the places where the frequencies are the most concentrated (between 2000 and 3000 Hz), which illustrates here a recording of high fidelity. The greater repartition of the yellow

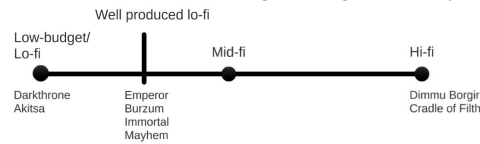


Figure 9: The place of Dimmu Borgir on the lo-fi/hi-fi axis.

color (not showing separated bands as much as in the other spectrogram images), also illustrates the better distribution of all frequencies in the spectrum. Finally, the spaced transients on the left side of the image represent

the bass guitar attacks mentioned earlier. I thus position this excerpt on the extreme right side of the axis, as being a hi-fi production (figure 9).

Even if this hi-fi aesthetic ensured a larger popularity for Dimmu Borgir outside of the black metal scene, it had a rather devastating effect in the underground scene. Indeed, fans began calling this group “sell-outs”, which refers to:

the process by which artists or songs sell beyond their initial market which, in turn, loses its sense of possession, exclusive ownership and familiar belonging ... ‘selling out’ means *selling* to *outsiders*. (Thornton: 1996, p.124; original emphasis)

Some groups, such as Moribond explained, managed to maintain their underground status despite their aesthetics of better fidelity. This is the case with bands Dissection (Germany), Bexehen (Finland) and Watain (Sweden).



Figure 10: Typical live performance from Watain (© Google image).

Regarding the latter, most of its albums were produced by Necromorbus Studio, located in Stockholm. The aesthetic production of Watain is described by Moribond as being “not entirely clean but offering a higher level of dynamic” (Ethnographic interview, November 2, 2017). In this regard, Mgła (e.g. *Exercise of*

Futility, 2015) seems to also be associated with this kind of hi-fi aesthetic, while remaining well regarded in the black metal scene internationally.

However, Watain is also known to offer extremely transgressive performances during their shows¹⁷, remaining “authentic” to the eyes of the fans and musicians but also preventing the group from gaining popularity outside the underground, despite the better quality of its recordings.

The selected excerpt from Watain is the song “De Profundis” from the album *The Wild Hunt* (2013)¹⁸. Listening to the excerpt, we can hear that the reverb is mostly present on the drums and voice. All instruments are audible, and their positioning seems well-balanced, even if the bass frequencies are less prominent here than in the previous excerpts. Looking at the frequency analysis (figure 11), we can see it covers 35 Hz to 10 kHz, which means that the frequency range is greater than in the previous example.

As in the last spectrogram image, frequencies are also well distributed, and we can distinguish a precise degree of definition thanks to the many small transients we can see all over the spectrum (figure 12).

Thus, even though the spectrogram of Dimmu Borgir showed a slightly better definition, I also place the Watain's excerpt close to the right end of the axis (figure 13).

Having explored both ends of the axis, it is now possible to examine the bands of the Québec black metal scene to understand why their aesthetic is best described as “mid-fi”. I will focus here on two excerpts: “Le lai de la vermine” from *Délétère* (*Per Aspera ad Pestilentiam*, 2017)¹⁹ and “Là où

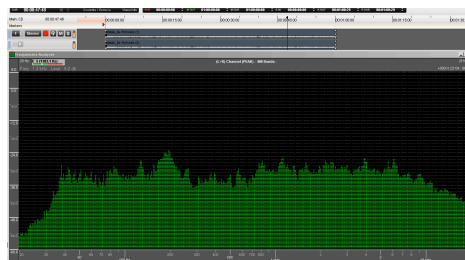


Figure 11: Frequency analysis image of "De Profundis" from Watain.

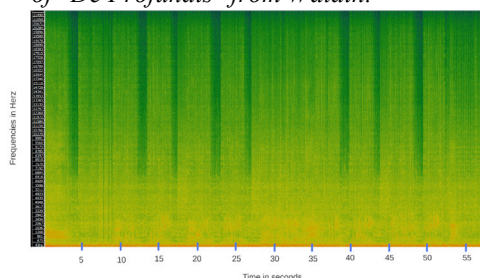


Figure 12: Spectrogram image of "De Profundis" from Watain.

Figure 13: The place of Watain on the lo-fi/hi-fi axis.

¹⁷ They are known to throw pork blood on the crowd – which they are covered in as well – and to play next to rotting carcasses of animals, causing nauseous smells.

¹⁸ It is possible to listen to the song “De Profundis” (Watain) following this Youtube link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7CT3eTBk85I>

¹⁹ The song “Le lai de la vermine” (Délétère) is available through this Youtube link (at 01:37): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HVzqVZe48RI>

nous allons”, from Fortresses’ last album (*Thèmes pour la rébellion*, 2016)²⁰. These excerpts illustrate two types of production used in the scene. Indeed, bands such as Délétère, Csejthe or Forteresse (with its first albums) are auto-produced, and others, such as Monarque, Chasse-Galerie and more recently, Forteresse, use the help of professional studios. I also chose these excerpts because these two bands are labelled by fans as having an aesthetic production that is “in the middle”. When listening to Délétères’ song, we first notice that all the frequencies seemed to be taken in one block, since the recording doesn’t have a large variation in frequencies. Indeed, the mid and lower frequencies seem less clearly transmitted compared to the higher frequencies of the cymbals, which can be heard really clearly. However, the voice and instruments seem well defined, since we can clearly distinguish each word or instrumental parts.

Looking at the frequency analysis image, we can see that the main frequencies of this recording are situated between 100 Hz and 5000 Hz, which is slightly similar to the Emperor’s excerpt (figure 14).

The spectrogram (figure 15), on the other hand, shows a high level of energy between 2000 to 4000 Hz, reflecting the sound block mentioned before. It also allows us to see clearly each attack of the cymbals in the higher frequencies, thanks to the many defined transients. However, it also demonstrates that the lower frequencies are less defined, since transients are not discernable in that portion of the image.

The last excerpt, “Là où nous allons” from Forteresse, was produced by Necromorbus studio in Stockholm.

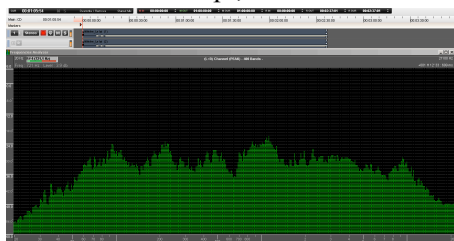


Figure 14: Frequency analysis image of "Le lai de la vermine" from Délétère.

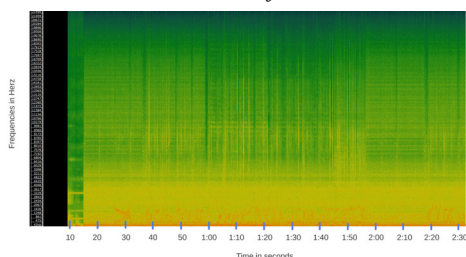


Figure 15: Spectrogram analysis of "Le lai de la vermine" from Délétère.

In this regard, Fiel and Moribond told me that by making the choice to be professionally produced for the first time, they wanted to give a more powerful sound to their music, without sacrificing the aggressiveness of their black metal sound. They also explained that they wanted to achieve a “wall of sound” effect (not to be confused with Phil Spector’s “wall of sound”) (Ethnographic interview, November 2, 2017). Listening to the excerpt, we can hear quite distinctively this “wall of sound” in the way the guitars are positioned on each side, playing the same melody and using

²⁰ It is possible to access to the song “Là où nous allons” (Forteresse) at the following Youtube link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ACVOpYnmSg0>

the same harsh sound. The lower frequencies are also much more present in this excerpt than in the previous one and all instruments remain clearly audible. However, the voice seems to be positioned a little bit more at the back of the mix than in the last example.

The frequency analysis image of this excerpt (figure 16) presents a frequency range extending from 80 Hz to 7 KHz, that is, it is slightly narrower than the Watain excerpt. However, the range of frequencies remains larger than Délétaire's excerpt.

The spectrogram (figure 17), for its part, shows a higher concentration of energy in the mid-high region of the spectrum (the different yellow bands), exemplifying the "wall of sound" effect. However, by doing so, it also removes a little bit of definition to the recording. Indeed, thick yellow bands can be seen up to about 5000 Hz, masking the transients of this region. Besides that, we still can see a considerable number of transients in the higher area of the image.

This short analysis allows us to have a more nuanced idea of the place of each excerpts on the lo-fi/hi-fi axis (figure 18). We can see, not surprisingly, that Darkthrone's and Dimmu Borgir's excerpts present the widest differences, one clearly belonging to the lo-fi and the other to the hi-fi aesthetic production. Emperor's and Délétaire's excerpts, with their slightly better production, are located closer to the middle of the axis, where Délétaire seems to present an aesthetic of a slightly better fidelity than Emperor, who remained closer to the left side. Finally, Watain's and Forteresse's excerpts are extremely similar, probably since they were produced at the same studio. However, the difference can be found in the lack of definition in the mid-high region of Forteresse's excerpt, which lessens the fidelity. Therefore, Watain can be placed close to the right side of the axis, while I place Forteresse at the junction point of the mid-fi and hi-fi categorization.

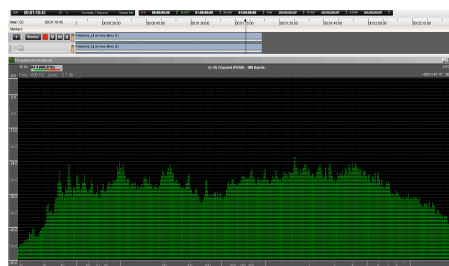


Figure 16: Frequency analysis of "Là où nous allons" from Forteresse.

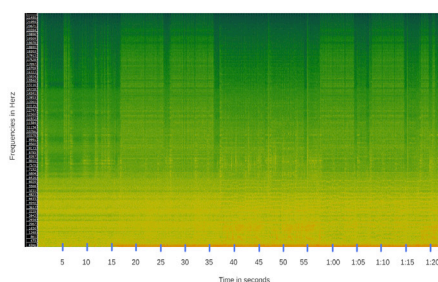


Figure 17: Spectrogram image from "Là où nous allons" from Forteresse

Figure 18: Final comparison of excerpts on lo-fi/hi-fi axis.

The technological advances and the changes in the hi-fi/lo-fi aesthetic conceptions

Changes in recording technique during the last twenty years have influenced members of the scene in their aesthetic conception of black metal sound. Indeed, according to Auster, a sound technician and musician who has been involved in the scene – first as a musician, and later as a sound engineer – for more than 20 years, the biggest difference between the first black metal productions and the latest ones is linked with the improvement of technology, the presence of a “standard lo-fi sound” and the greater expertise of the sound engineers. The lo-fi black metal aesthetic of the 1990s was also linked with the absence of norms and formats. More specifically, he recalls:

The production trends were probably less formatted at the time. There wasn't a standard on how black metal should sound. Well, there was some trends but the movement was starting, so engineers and bands were going in lots of different directions. Some albums sounded muffled and others really bright or thin. Effects were all over the place and the sound levels varied a lot too. [...] So, there was more color or sonic texture in the recordings from one album to another and from one band to another. (Ethnographic interview, December 12, 2017)

Today, as he explains, there is a greater neutrality in the sound production because of the higher quality of the equipment. Another important element to consider, according to Auster, is that today's technicians are more qualified when it comes to producing black metal artists, which also influences the quality in the aesthetic productions. By that comment, he means that producers at first didn't know how to elaborate this specific sound and atmosphere, rendering a sound that was too clean for what bands expected. However, as he points out, the aesthetic choices have not changed dramatically. Indeed, as he mentions:

[...] I don't think most the modern black metal bands changed their sonical requirements. Lots of them are still aiming for this lo-fi sound. But with today's recording equipment, the sonical results changed. I think the most significant change was the transition from analog to digital. Now, there is less color, noise and imperfections coming from the machines, so it sounds cleaner. As everything sounds flatter and closer to reality, this means that if you want a more textured sound, you must craft it consciously as a choice. (Ethnographic interview, December 12, 2017)

Many other members also agree with the importance of technological development in the aesthetic production of black metal, such as Thorleif. According to the latter:

By downgrading and decreasing the quality of your production, but in a thoughtful way, you make a choice. It gives a color to your music and it is used to convey an emotion. (Ethnographic interview, December 16, 2016)

Moreover, when I told Auster about the way the scene members were considering their music (as being “in the middle”), he explained:

I understand what they mean by that. It's about finding a balance between a lo-fi production and a good production, where you hear everything. I have to agree with this. When instruments tones are too colored the audibility is affected. In extreme cases, you don't even distinguish which instrument you're hearing in different frequency ranges. [...] Some recordings were raw to a point of becoming a puddle of indistinct sound mud. It take multiple listening to actually grasp the music in this sonic chaos. While in a good production, everything is in its place... But when everything is too much in a defined spot without any overlap, it can sound fake. You'll miss the life of the instrument and you can't believe it's a live band anymore. I think sounding fake is what most black metal bands are trying to avoid. (Ethnographic interview, December 12, 2017)

What emerges from this comment is the insight that, according to the standards of black metal, a good, hi-fi production is heard as being fake; however, producers no longer aim for a lo-fi sound either. In addition, these new technological possibilities have also had a negative effect – meaning, an effect that is understood as negative by members of Québec black metal bands. Antoine (drummer for the bands Monarque and Délétère) and Sébastien (leader from Sorcier des Glaces and sound engineer) explain, technological advances gave the opportunity for everybody to reproduce the lo-fi sound in their bedroom and transformed the specificity and the originality of lo-fi into a trend (Ethnographic interviews, October 31, 2016; December 9, 2016). This establishment of a tendency goes fundamentally against the value that scene members share, that is, the willingness to stay underground by avoiding any kind of aesthetic trends. Therefore, the mid-fi sound seems to have allowed them the possibility of exploring other aesthetics without scaring their authenticity and originality.

Conclusion

To conclude, I return to the two paradigm shifts I mentioned in the introduction. First, I claimed that black metal music cannot be understood anymore as being associated with only lo-fi aesthetics. In this article I demonstrated (with many examples) that the aesthetic production of this style is much more diverse than what academics have accounted for, to date. Thus, I propose to use the term “mid-fi”, which reflects the way the members of the black metal scene in Québec understand their sound. Thereafter, I argued

that it is possible to qualify the aesthetic production of Québec scene as being “mid-fi”. At this point of my study, I am making only an initial claim, since many more analyses must be made to distinguish the presence (or the absence) of a tendency in the Québec black metal scene. However, according to the chosen extracts we can associate the mid-fi aesthetic with a sound presenting the harsh and boomy characteristics of lo-fi, but with certain hi-fi features, specifically the definition of the attacks and the possibility to clearly hear each of the instruments used.

In order to pursue and improve this analysis, it is also important to acknowledge its limitations. Indeed, even if the tools used can provide more details regarding the frequencies being represented, they cannot fully replace simply hearing of the examples (eg. a spectrogram might present a lot of transients even if the recording sound fairly lo-fi). Also, in order to better select future examples, it will be important as well to consider the fact that bands improved through the years (they learned more about sound production and they gained better control of their instruments), which greatly influenced the quality of their productions. For example, the first albums of Forteresse (e. g. *Métal noir québécois*, 2006; *Les hivers de notre époque*, 2008; *Crépuscule d’octobre*, 2011) can be considered as belonging to lo-fi aesthetic, as can the first album of Délétère (*Les heures de la peste*, 2015).

The second paradigm shift is linked with the way the new standards used by many contemporary black metal bands suggest that the determination of authenticity is no longer linked with lo-fi aesthetic production. Indeed, I have shown that a lo-fi aesthetic has been used extensively by many bands, which transformed the exclusiveness of this sound into a tendency. This abundant use seems to have modified the way authenticity is perceived by scene members, meaning that it does no longer refers to the simple polarization of lo-fi = authentic/hi-fi= inauthentic. However, this opposition is not solely applicable to black metal but is as a matter of fact present in all the history of popular music. Indeed, as Moore suggests:

[...] the distinction between ‘authentic’ and its opposite (‘entertainment’ at some times, ‘commercial’ at others) underpins the history of popular music for the time of Elvis Presley onwards, and that such a history proceeds as a pendulum, swinging from one extreme to the other, frequently with much disagreement among fans and critics as to which term to apply to which music – again such attributions are to be fought for (Moore: 2002, p. 211).

In this context, if the need for black metal bands to build a very distinct aesthetic from death metal was at a prerogative in the beginning of the 1990s, it does not seem to have as much importance today, where we find more and more crossovers between styles. Indeed, the aesthetic codes that were previously reserved for black metal are now used by death metal and

vice versa (eg. we can find several death/black groups, such as Belphegor or Behemoth)²¹.

Moreover, my analysis of Forteresse's excerpt also showed a higher fidelity than what was expected based on interviews. Indeed, the fact that members of the Québec scene are referring to Forteresse – and to other bands of the Québec scene that have an even better production (e.g. Monarque, Chasse-Galerie) – as having a “mid-fi” aesthetic, implies that scene members are developing more nuanced perception of what it means to be “authentic”. This could be explained by the fact that even if the lo-fi aesthetic is not as related as before to a higher level of authenticity, a good production is still perceived as inauthentic, up to a certain point. Indeed, describing these recordings as belonging to a hi-fi aesthetic could lessen the way in which the group is esteemed by underground fans of black metal; therefore, qualifying them as “in the middle” protects the legitimacy and the authenticity of the scene.

Finally, although this paper is oriented towards a specific scene, I believe that black metal in Québec is exemplifying a more general tendency in the contemporary aesthetic production of black metal around the globe. More analysis in that direction will be done in future studies.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to the following persons for helping me to complete this paper: Serges Samson, Gérald Côté, Jacqueline Fortier and Heather MacLachlan.

References

Bibliography

- Aites, A and Ewell, A. (producers). (2009) *Until the Light takes Us*. United States: Variance Films.
- Evens, A. (2005) *Sound Ideas: Music, Machines, and Experience*. Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press.
- Hagen, R. (2011) Musical Style, Ideology, and Mythology in Norwegian Black Metal. In Wallach, J. et al (eds.) *Metal Rules the Globe: Heavy Metal Music Around the World*. Durham; London: Duke University Press, pp. 180-199.
- Hainaut, B. (2012). Le style black metal. Master Thesis. Université Paris-Sorbonne (Paris).
- Harper, A. (2014) Lo-fi Aesthetic in Popular Music Discourse. Doctoral thesis. University of Oxford.
- Kromhout, J. M. (2009). As distant and close as can be: Lo-fi recording: site-specificity and (in)authenticity. Paper presented at the 5th ARP Conference (Cardiff University, England).

²¹ However, as Moore pointed out: (...) this commercial/authentic polarity is illusory, since all mass-mediated music is subject to commercial imperatives, but what matters to listeners is whether such subjection appears to be accepted, resisted, or negotiated with, by those to whom they are listening (Moore, 2002, p. 218).

- Kuppens, An H. and van der Pol, F. (2014) 'True' black metal: The construction of authenticity by Dutch black metal Fans. *Communications: the European journal of communication research* 39, 9, pp. 151-167.
- Lapointe, Y. (2012) Les caractéristiques distinctives de la musique haute-fidélité. Master Thesis. Université Laval (Québec, Canada).
- Moore, A. (2012). Songs Means: Analysing and Interpreting Recorded Popular Song. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate.
- Moore, A. (2002). "Authenticity as Authentication". *Popular Music* 21, 2, pp. 209-223.
- Podoshen, J. et al. (2017) Consuming abjection: an examination of death and disgust in the black metal scene. *Consumption Markets & Culture*, DOI: 10.1080/10253866.2017.1345240
- Reyes, I. (2013) Blacker than death: Recollecting the "Black Turn" in metal aesthetic. *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 25, 2, pp. 240-257.
- Rudy, D. and Citton, Y. (2014) Le lo-fi : Épaissir la médiation pour intensifier la relation. Presses de Sciences Po. 1, 48, pp 109-124.
- Sterne, J. (2003) The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction. Durham: Duke University Press.
- St-Laurent, M. (2018). Le métal noir québécois: Analyse du récit phonographique et identitaire d'une scène marginale. Doctoral Thesis. Université Laval (Québec, Canada). In progress.
- Thompson, C. (2012). 'Sons of Northern Darkness': Reflections of National Identity in Norway through Black Metal. Master Thesis. University of Uppsala (Uppsala, Sweden).
- Thornton, S. (1996). Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press.
- Wadhams, Wayne. (1988) *Dictionary of Music Production and Engineering Terminology*. New York: Shirmer Books.

Interviews

- Antoine. (2016) Ethnographic interview realized on October 31st.
- Auster. (2017) Ethnographic interview realized on December 12.
- Fiel and Moribond. (2017) Ethnographic interview realized on November 2nd.
- Moribond. (2016) Ethnographic interview realized on June 17th.
- Samson, S. (2017) Interview realized on October 30th.
- Samson, S. (2017) Interview realized on November 7th.
- Sébastien. (2016) Ethnographic interview realized on December 9th.
- Stan. (2016) Ethnographic interview realized on October 3rd.
- Thorleif. (2016) Ethnographic interview realized on December 16th.

Discography

- Anorexia Nervosa. Osmose productions, 2001
- Akitsa. Grands tyrans. Tour de garde, 2015.
- Cradle of Filth. Thornography. Roadrunners Records, 2006.
- Darkthrone. 'Transilvanian Hunger', Transilvanian Hunger. Peaceville Records, 1994.
- Dimmu Borgir. Death Cult Armageddon. Nuclear Blast, 2003.
- Dimmu Borgir. 'Born Treacherous'. Abrahadabra, 2010.
- Délétère. 'Le lai de la vermine'. Per aspera ad pertilentiam. Sepulchral Productions, 2017.
- Emperor. 'I am the Black Wizard'. In the Nightside Eclipse. Candlelight Records, 1994.
- Forteresse. 'Là où nous allons'. Thèmes pour la rébellion. Sepulchral Productions, 2016.
- Mgå. Exercise of Futility. Northern Heritage Records, 2015.
- Watain. 'De Profundis'. The Wild Hunt. Century Media Records, 2013.