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MUSIC UNDER PRESSURE: WAR AND THE CREATIVE LIVES OF COMPOSERS

Armed conflict is commonly seen as incompatible with sustained artistic creativity. This article revisits that assumption through the experience of Western classical composers. Drawing on quantitative and biographical evidence on composers born after 1800, it examines how war shaped composers' mobility, creative output, and cultural reception. Armed conflict frequently disrupted cultural infrastructure, displaced composers, and weakened established cultural centres, but its effects on creative production were not uniform. In particular, defensive wars did not necessarily suppress musical output and, in some contexts, coincided with sustained or heightened creative activity. Wartime conditions also influenced which works acquired lasting cultural significance, as music became associated with collective experience and historical memory. These patterns shed light on how conflict reshapes artistic careers, and on the mechanisms through which wartime reception can elevate certain works into durable symbols of collective experience – processes of cultural and moral mobilization during wartime.



War, culture, and cultural mobilization

Western classical composers offer a particularly useful lens through which to examine these dynamics of conflict and composition. Their work depended on a stable musical ecosystem – concert halls, conservatories, patronage systems, publishers, and audiences – that were highly sensitive to political and economic disruption. From the

Napoleonic wars through the World Wars, armed conflict reshaped the conditions under which music was created, circulated, and remembered. At the same time, some musical works acquired symbolic significance during wartime, becoming associated with collective endurance, loss, and historical experience.

This article draws on a long-run dataset constructed as part of a broader research programme examining the historical lives and careers of composers. The underlying study uses detailed historical data on 164 prominent Western classical composers born after 1800, drawing primarily on *Grove Music Online* (2009), a major musicological reference work with detailed entries on composers' lives and careers, to reconstruct life-course and career trajectories, including residence and migration patterns. For a subset of 115 composers, we also measure creative output using information on major works compiled by Gilder and Port (1978). These biographical and output data are linked to the *Correlates of War* project, a widely used data project that compiles systematic cross-national data on the timing, location, and nature of armed conflicts since the early nineteenth century. Originally developed for the comparative study of war, the project provides a consistent framework for identifying the onset, duration, and type of conflict across countries and over time. Linking these biographical and output data to the *Correlates of War* Project makes it possible to identify when composers lived under wartime conditions, distinguish between international and civil conflicts, and examine how different types of war relate to composers' mobility, creative production, and long-term cultural reception.

The present article builds directly on a series of earlier studies using these data. Previous research links war to a higher likelihood of composer migration, contributing to long-term shifts in cultural centres (Borowiecki 2012; Borowiecki 2013). Other work examines how conflict relates to composers' creative output over the life cycle, suggesting effects that were heterogeneous rather than uniformly negative (Borowiecki and O'Hagan 2013; Borowiecki 2014). Taken together, these studies indicate that war reshaped both the geography of cultural production and the timing and volume of creative work. This article brings these strands together and places them in a broader historical and cultural context, examining not only how war disrupted creative careers, but also how wartime conditions influenced the social meaning and long-term reception of musical works.

The analysis also forms part of a broader project culminating in the forthcoming book *What Makes a Great Composer? A Data-Driven Exploration of Music History* (Borowiecki and Law 2026). The book integrates large-scale historical data with biographical evidence to examine how creative careers evolve over time and how they are shaped by incentives and institutions, mobility, education, emotional life, and historical shocks – including war. While the book develops these themes across multiple dimensions, the present article focuses specifically on how armed conflict affected composers' displacement, creative production, and cultural reception of com-

posers born after 1800, whose careers unfolded during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

A central finding is that war did not affect composers – or culture more broadly – in a uniform way. Many conflicts disrupted creative life by destroying cultural infrastructure and forcing migration. Composers often left established cultural centres in search of safety, contributing to the decline of some cities and the rise of others. At the same time, wartime conditions could alter the social function of music itself. Musical works could acquire heightened social meaning, functioning as media through which societies articulated endurance, loss, and collective purpose. Ludwig van Beethoven, who remained in Vienna during the Napoleonic occupation, composed works shaped by the conflict, including *Wellington's Victory*, which commemorated Napoleon's defeat and became an immediate public success (Swafford 2014). Later, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* turned the memory of invasion into musical commemoration. During the twentieth century, Dmitri Shostakovich's *Symphony No. 7 ("Leningrad")*, written during the siege of Leningrad, became an international symbol of resistance and survival, while Edward Elgar's *Polonia* and *Carillon* responded to the occupation of Poland and Belgium during the First World War. These examples illustrate how war shaped not only the conditions of composition, but also the public meaning and long-term reception of musical works.

This perspective helps clarify how we approach and contribute to the study and definition of *åndelig oprustning*, here understood as cultural and moral mobilization. Rather than referring primarily to formal cultural policy, the concept describes a broader social process through which artistic works can acquire heightened emotional and symbolic significance under conditions of threat. In wartime contexts, music may become associated with shared experiences of conflict and loss, and can serve as a reference point through which societies interpret these experiences. In this sense, war can transform the social meaning of artistic works, reshaping how music is understood, performed, and remembered. War thus does not simply interrupt cultural production; it also reshapes the conditions under which culture is created, circulated, and remembered. Examining such processes allows historians and cultural economists to analyse, using biographical and quantitative evidence, how artistic works become embedded in broader historical dynamics.

The remainder of the article proceeds in four steps. Section 2 examines how war disrupted the infrastructure of musical life and the economic conditions necessary for sustained creative work. Section 3 analyses conflict-induced displacement and shows how wartime migration contributed to a long-term remapping of cultural centres. Section 4 examines patterns of creative output during wartime and explains why productivity did not uniformly decline, particularly in defensive conflicts. Section 5 considers how wartime reception shaped canon formation and contributed to processes of cultural and moral mobilization. The conclusion reflects on the broader

implications of these findings for the relationship between culture, conflict, and historical memory.

2. War as disruption: breaking the conditions of creativity

Mobilisation in nineteenth and twentieth century Europe redirected labour, money, and attention towards military priorities, with immediate spillovers for musical life. Concert seasons contracted, publishers became more cautious, and many cultural organisations suspended activities or closed entirely. For composers, this mattered because creative work depended on a fragile ecosystem: stable patronage or employment, functioning concert venues, access to performers, publishers willing to invest in new works, and dense professional networks. Even where physical destruction was limited, uncertainty, shortages, and political instability undermined the continuity required for sustained creative work.

Historical evidence confirms that such exposure was widespread. Among the 164 composers in our dataset, nearly three quarters lived through at least one international war, and roughly one third experienced civil conflict during their lifetime. On average, composers spent more than six years living in countries engaged in international wars and close to a year in countries affected by civil conflict. Exposure to conflict was therefore not exceptional, but a recurring feature of composers' professional lives. These disruptions affected both established and emerging composers, particularly those whose careers depended on musical infrastructure such as opera houses, conservatories, and orchestras.

The First World War provides a clear illustration of how conflict disrupted creative careers. Maurice Ravel, one of France's leading composers, enlisted in the French army and served as a driver near the front. The experience brought him into close contact with the human costs of war and left traces in his creative work. His suite *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, written during and in its immediate aftermath, was dedicated to friends lost in combat, reflecting both personal grief and broader collective loss. As Rogers (2023) shows, the war affected not only the practical conditions under which Ravel worked, but also the emotional and symbolic content of his music.

Even composers not directly engaged in combat experienced severe professional disruption. Igor Stravinsky, based in Paris before the war, found himself stranded in neutral Switzerland as international travel became constrained and established performance circuits collapsed. Cut off from major musical centres and patronage networks, he faced significant financial and professional uncertainty. Although Stravinsky continued to compose, the ecosystem that had supported his earlier career had largely disintegrated, illustrating how war could undermine the professional foundations of even the most successful composers (Fladt 2014).

Such disruptions were particularly severe during civil wars and internal conflicts, which directly undermined the foundations of cultural life. Concert venues ceased operations, funding disappeared, and professional networks fragmented, forcing many composers to suspend or redirect their careers. Even when composers remained physically safe, the loss of this organisational continuity could have lasting consequences for their professional development. In many cases, these disruptions also prompted relocation, contributing to longer-term shifts in the geography of musical life.

3. Displacement and the remapping of cultural centres

For composers, displacement was one of the most visible consequences of war. Armed conflict increased the likelihood that composers would leave their place of residence, often abruptly and under conditions of considerable uncertainty. Quantitative evidence confirms this pattern. Using biographical data on 164 prominent composers born after 1800, earlier research shows that composers were significantly more likely to migrate during periods of armed conflict, particularly when wars affected their country of residence directly (Borowiecki 2012; Borowiecki 2013). These movements were driven less by artistic opportunity than by concerns over safety, political instability, and the collapse of the professional environments that sustained their careers. This process reshaped Europe's cultural geography. Long-standing centres of musical life – cities that had accumulated talent and prestige over generations – could lose their position rapidly once conflict set in. When composers left, they took with them not only individual skills but also artistic practices, teaching traditions, and professional networks. Because artistic production tends to cluster geographically, the departure of creative talent weakened the agglomeration advantages that had sustained these centres in the first place. Evidence from the historical geography of classical music shows that war reduced the benefits of remaining in established cultural hubs, and that many centres did not fully recover once composers had relocated elsewhere (Borowiecki 2015). Even after hostilities ended, many composers did not return, either because conditions remained unstable or because they had established new professional and personal ties elsewhere. More broadly, the relocation of artists has been shown to contribute to the emergence of new cultural centres while others decline (Borowiecki and Dahl 2021).

Individual careers illustrate these broader dynamics. The case of Béla Bartók, for example, shows how displacement could redirect creative trajectories while simultaneously weakening established cultural environments. As Hungary's political conditions deteriorated, Bartók emigrated to the United States in 1940. Although the move ensured his physical safety, it also separated him from the professional environment and cultural milieu in which his career had developed. Like many displaced compos-

ers, he faced uncertainty and struggled to secure stable income and recognition in his new setting. His case reflects a broader pattern in which displacement provided safety but disrupted established career trajectories.

Erich Wolfgang Korngold provides another example of how conflict-induced migration contributed to the remapping of musical production. Following the Nazi annexation of Austria in 1938, Korngold emigrated to the United States, where he became a central figure in the development of Hollywood film music. His displacement illustrates how war not only disrupted individual careers but also contributed to the emergence of new centres of musical activity outside Europe. The arrival of European composers in the United States likely played an important role in strengthening American musical life and transforming cities such as Los Angeles and New York into major cultural centres during the mid-twentieth century (Borowiecki and Dahl 2021; Borowiecki and Graddy 2021).

At the aggregate level, such movements contributed to a long-term reordering of cultural centres. Paris, which had dominated Europe's musical landscape for much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Borowiecki and O'Hagan, 2012), lost prominence during and after the Second World War, while American cities gained importance as destinations for displaced composers. These shifts were not the result of deliberate cultural policy, but of cumulative individual decisions made under pressure. Conflict-induced migration thus weakened some established cultural hubs while strengthening others, producing lasting changes in the geography of musical activity.

These patterns highlight a broader paradox. War impoverished some cultural centres by forcing artists to leave, yet it simultaneously contributed to the growth of others by concentrating displaced talent in new locations. Cultural production did not disappear under conditions of conflict; it moved, adapted, and re-emerged in new settings. But relocation alone does not tell us what happened to the volume of creative work during war. The next section examines how output changed under wartime conditions.

4. Creativity under pressure: the wartime productivity puzzle

Counts of major works for a subset of 115 composers, whose creative output can be systematically measured over the life cycle, indicate that war did not uniformly suppress productivity (Borowiecki and O'Hagan 2013; Borowiecki 2014). Figure 1 compares composers' output at different ages during peacetime and during defensive wars. In peacetime, productivity follows an inverted U-shaped pattern, rising in early adulthood, peaking in mid-career, and gradually declining thereafter. During defensive wars, however, output does not fall below peacetime levels and, for most

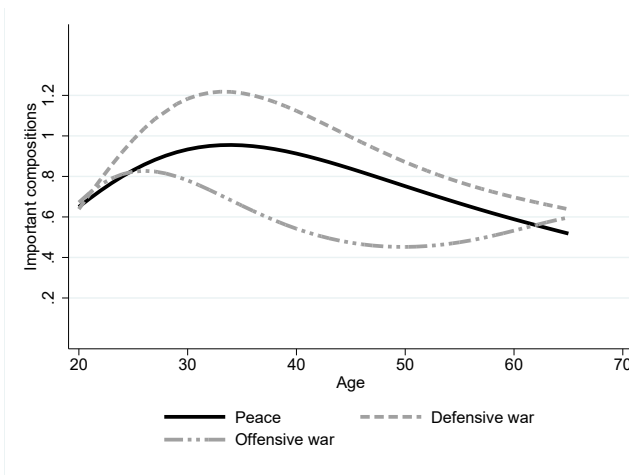


Figure 1. Creativity under pressure: composer productivity in peace and defensive war

The figure shows average creative output of Western classical composers over the life cycle, comparing periods of peace with periods of defensive war. The sample consists of composers born between 1800 and 1949. Output is measured as the number of major works produced, based on Gilder and Port (1978), combined with war classifications from the Correlates of War dataset (Sarkees 2000).

age groups, exceeds them. Despite the severe disruptions described above, composers often continued to work and, in some cases, became more productive.

This pattern suggests that war did not affect creativity through a single channel. Rather, conflict reshaped the conditions of artistic production in ways that could either hinder or sustain output. The key question, then, is what mechanisms allowed creative work to continue despite the disruptions war imposed on mobility, performance, and professional life.

A key distinction lies in how wars were experienced. Defensive conflicts – those involving invasion or direct threat to a composer’s country of residence – often created conditions in which artistic work acquired heightened urgency and relevance. Rather than functioning solely as aesthetic expression, composition could become a means through which composers responded to shared social and emotional circumstances. Music offered a way to process loss, articulate collective experience, and contribute symbolically to wartime mobilisation. Works such as Shostakovich’s *Symphony No. 7 (“Leningrad”)* and Ravel’s *Le Tombeau de Couperin* make this especially clear. The former became a public symbol of endurance and resistance during the siege of Leningrad, while the latter transformed private bereavement into a broader act of wartime commemoration through its dedications to friends killed in combat (Anderson 2019; Rogers 2023). In such cases, war could heighten the cultural salience of composition rather than suppress it.

At the same time, these patterns were not uniform across all types of conflict. Wars fought far from home or perceived as offensive tended to disrupt cultural life without generating the same sense of shared urgency or symbolic purpose. Civil wars were

particularly destructive, as they fractured societies and the cultural infrastructure on which musical production depended. Under such conditions, both the practical foundations and the social meaning of artistic work were weakened.

Taken together, these findings suggest that wartime creativity depended not only on material conditions, but also on how conflict was experienced and understood. Where war threatened the survival of political communities or cultural identities, artistic production could acquire heightened significance, supporting continued creative activity even under adverse conditions. Rather than suppressing creativity uniformly, war reshaped the environment in which creative work took place.

These patterns also help explain how some wartime compositions acquired lasting cultural importance. The heightened social significance of music under conditions of conflict contributed to the continued performance, circulation, and remembrance of works associated with collective experience.

5. Canon formation in wartime: why some works endure

War influenced not only what composers wrote, but also which works endured. Periods of conflict often acted as powerful filters, elevating certain pieces to lasting prominence and relegating others to the margins of the repertoire. Rather than simply interrupting cultural life, conflict reordered it, influencing which works were performed, circulated, and remembered. This process was driven less by formal aesthetic criteria than by reception, repetition, and collective remembrance.

In wartime, audiences often sought music that spoke directly to their circumstances. Works that resonated emotionally—through themes of resistance, mourning, endurance, or shared identity—were more likely to be performed, broadcast, and remembered. Through their continued use in wartime settings, certain compositions became closely linked to collective experience and historical memory. Over time, these associations reinforced their prominence in the repertoire and contributed to their long-term place in the canon.

Other works acquired renewed significance when later conflicts encouraged listeners to hear them as symbols of national endurance and identity. Frédéric Chopin's *Military Polonaise*, composed in 1838, long carried patriotic associations and acquired renewed symbolic importance in wartime Poland, where it was daily broadcast by Polish Radio and came to function as a musical emblem of national identity and resilience (Staško-Mazur 2011). Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*, written in 1880 to commemorate Russia's defense against Napoleon, likewise remained available for later acts of historical remembrance because of its explicit association with invasion, resistance, and national survival. These examples suggest that wartime conditions shaped not only creative production, but also long-run cultural selection. Repeated performance under conditions of conflict could deepen the association between particular works

and collective historical memory, increasing the likelihood that they would continue to be performed and remembered long after the original conflict had ended.

This process helps explain how music could contribute to cultural and moral mobilization in wartime. Cultural works did not merely reflect wartime experience; through their continued performance and circulation, they became part of the symbolic framework through which societies interpreted conflict. Works associated with shared struggle and sacrifice acquired meanings that extended beyond their original composition, reinforcing collective identity and shaping how conflict was remembered. More broadly, this interpretation is consistent with research on cultural memory, which shows how commemorative practices help link past conflict to present identities, and with scholarship on music and memory that treats musical works as carriers of collective historical meaning (Drozdowski et al. 2019; Shelemay 2006).

Canon formation in wartime thus reflects the interaction between artistic production and historical circumstance. Wartime conditions influenced not only which works were created, but which were preserved, performed, and remembered. Cultural value emerged through use and reception as much as through composition itself. In this way, war did not simply disrupt musical life – it also contributed to the long-term cultural standing of works that became enduring symbols of historical experience.

6. Cultural and moral mobilization as a historical process

What does this historical evidence suggest about ‘åndelig oprustning’, or cultural and moral mobilization? Here the term is used not to denote a formal doctrine or coordinated cultural policy, but to describe a process that can be observed historically: the way musical works acquired heightened symbolic significance through wartime performance, circulation, and reception. From this perspective, culture played a dual role in conflict. Wars disrupt artistic production by destabilising cultural infrastructure and displacing artists, but they can also create conditions in which cultural expression acquires heightened social importance. Music can provide a means through which societies interpret collective experience, articulate loss, and reinforce shared identity.

Importantly, these processes do not always take the form of explicit cultural programmes or coordinated policy. Instead, they often emerge through practice. Compositions acquire significance through repeated performance, broadcasting, and association with shared historical experience. As the preceding analysis suggests, works created or performed during defensive conflicts were especially likely to acquire symbolic importance, reflecting the perceived legitimacy and urgency of collective self-defence. Under such conditions, artistic production could contribute to broader processes of cultural mobilisation, even when composers themselves were not directly engaged in political activity.

The historical record also helps explain why defensive wars differed from other forms of conflict in their cultural effects. When war is experienced as an existential threat, artistic expression can acquire a heightened sense of purpose, reinforcing its perceived relevance. In contrast, wars fought abroad or civil conflicts that fracture domestic cultural infrastructure are more likely to disrupt cultural production without generating comparable symbolic cohesion. These differences help explain why creative output does not decline uniformly and why certain works acquire enduring cultural significance.

From this perspective, cultural and moral mobilization is best understood not as a deliberate cultural strategy, but as an emergent historical process. It arises through the interaction between artistic creation, organisational continuity, and collective experience. Cultural works provide symbolic reference points that help societies interpret and endure conflict, reinforcing social cohesion under conditions of threat. These effects are neither automatic nor universal, but depend on the presence of functioning cultural supports and artists capable of continuing creative work despite disruption.

7. Conclusion: culture, conflict, and Europe's shared past

This article has examined how armed conflict shaped the creative lives of Western classical composers. Rather than treating culture as simply a casualty of war, the historical evidence suggests a more complex relationship. Conflict disrupted institutions, displaced artists, and destabilised the professional environments that sustained creative work. Yet artistic production did not disappear. Instead, creative activity adapted to new circumstances, sometimes acquiring heightened social significance as music became associated with collective experience and historical memory.

More broadly, the analysis illustrates the value of combining quantitative historical data with cultural and biographical interpretation. Systematic evidence on composers' lives, migration patterns, and creative output makes it possible to identify large-scale patterns that would be difficult to observe through narrative sources alone. At the same time, historical context and individual cases help explain how these patterns emerged and why certain works and careers evolved as they did.

The experience of composers therefore highlights a broader point about culture in times of crisis. Artistic creativity is not insulated from historical shocks, yet neither is it extinguished by them. Instead, cultural works can become part of the way societies interpret and remember periods of disruption, linking artistic expression to collective historical experience.

This article draws on research developed in the forthcoming book, *What Makes a Great Composer? A Data-Driven Exploration of Music History* (Borowiecki and Law, Princeton University Press, 2026). The book examines how creativity in Western classical music emerges from the interaction between individual imagination and historical circumstance. Written by two economists with a long-standing engagement in music history, the book combines large-scale historical data with biographical evidence to trace how education, institutions, cities, emotion, and external shocks – from war to social change – shaped composers’ lives and legacies. While grounded in systematic empirical research, the book is written for a broad readership and integrates quantitative analysis with historical narrative and biographical examples, showing how creative careers evolved under changing historical conditions.

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Dansk resumé

Musik under pres: Krig og komponisters kreative liv

Med udgangspunkt i kvantitative data og biografier for komponister født efter 1800 undersøger artiklen, hvordan krig påvirkede komponisters mobilitet og produktion. Datamaterialet viser, at krig ofte førte til, at komponister flygtede eller flyttede, men virkningen på kreativitet var ikke entydig eller ensartet. Endvidere viser materialet, at forsvarskrige ikke nødvendigvis hæmmede skabelsen af musik, og det i nogle tilfælde endda kunne øge aktiviteten. Artiklen peger også på, at nogle værker skabt i krigstid opnår varig kulturel og national betydning.