The violence and destruction of past wars and fears over future conflicts have elicited some of the most powerful artistic statements of the twentieth century. These statements cut across linguistic and geographical boundaries and are prevalent in all the arts. Although over fifty books have been published that deal with the theme of war in the visual arts, literature, and film, few large-scale studies have examined this theme in music. In this dissertation, therefore, I have sought to lay the foundation for a newly defined musical genre to be called “war music,” by providing the first compilation and extensive study of war-related music composed since the beginning of World War II. This genre consists of works related to war, to its alternative, peace, and to one of its possible extremes, the end of the world.

War-related art music of the twentieth century remains largely unexplored even though it includes over one thousand works written by composers from forty countries since 1939. A significant number of these works have been composed by the major composers of this century, among them Britten, Hindemith, Milhaud, Prokofiev, Schoenberg, Shostakovich, Strauss, Stravinsky, and hosts of prominent living composers. Of the 1,020 compositions that have been identified, approximately two hundred form the nucleus of this dissertation. In order to give the broadest and clearest picture of the social phenomenon of war music, all types and genres of art music are considered.

The reasons for this extensive output of war-related music are likewise examined through a compilation and examination of composers’ views on the issue of war and music. A large number of these previously unpublished comments are taken from correspondence on the subject between the author and composers of war-related music in Europe and America. Also, the historical precedents from the time of the ancient Greeks to the present day are considered in order to illustrate how innovative war music has been and to show the manner in which this music mirrors society’s changing views of war. With the rise of Fascism, Communism, two world wars, Korea, Vietnam, and the omnipresent threat of nuclear war and the extinction of the human race, composers in this century no longer praise war or the “heroics” of war as they often did in previous centuries. Now they only depict its horrors and preach its futility.