

Composers in tune with British stereotype

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British composers would appear to live up to their national stereotype of weather obsession, as they are twice as likely to have written music with climate themes as their counterparts from other nationalities.

New research by the Universities of Oxford and Reading has catalogued and analysed the frequencies with which weather is depicted in classical orchestral [music](#), from the 17th Century to the present day, to help understand how climate affects the way people think.

Dr. Karen Aplin, from Oxford University's Department of Physics, and Dr. Paul Williams, from the University of Reading's Department of Meteorology, both combine careers as [atmospheric scientists](#) with a love of classical music. The researchers were so convinced that classical music is influenced by climate that they pursued this [pilot study](#) in their own spare time, outside of their normal scientific work.

Dr. Aplin was inspired by the regular portrayal of weather-related phenomena in orchestral music she has played. She said: "As all music lovers know, the hint of a distant storm from a drum roll can be just as evocative as the skies depicted by Constable and Monet."

Dr. Paul Williams said: "We found that composers are generally influenced by their own environment in the type of weather they choose to represent. As befits the national stereotype, British composers seem disproportionately keen to depict the UK's variable [weather patterns](#) and stormy coastline."

The research showed British composers easily lead the way with musical weather, followed by the French and the Germans.

Generally, the most popular type of weather represented in music is the storm, presumably because of the use of storms by composers as an allegory for emotional turbulence, such as in Benjamin Britten's Four Sea Interludes from the opera Peter Grimes.

Wind was found to be the second most popular type of weather to feature in music. Wind can have a variety of characters, from a gentle breeze rustling the trees, as in the beginning of the third movement of Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*, to a full-blown Antarctic gale, as in Vaughan Williams' *Sinfonia Antarctica*.

The research also charts the development of musical instruments as aids to evoke a particular sound, for example a thunder sheet or wind machine, and the effect weather had on composers.

Strauss needed both sunshine and the Alpine landscape to inspire him. Several other composers, such as Berlioz, Schubert and Wagner, were also dependent on fair weather conditions, associated with high pressure, for their best output. Wagner, for example, referred to 'bad-weather unemployment' and wrote: "This is awful weather. My work has been put aside for two days, and the brain is stubbornly declining its services."

The study provides a baseline of cultural responses to weather before climate change. It seems inevitable that our changing climate will influence artistic expression. Will UK composers writing music for a 2050 Proms programme still be interested in representing our warmer, wetter weather? This paper will provide a basis for comparison.

'Meteorological phenomena in Western classical orchestral music', by Karen Aplin and Paul Williams, will be published in the October issue of

the Royal Meteorological Society journal [Weather](#). It will be available online from 23 September 2011.

Provided by University of Reading

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