

Real Life Stories

Silent Night - The True Story

Austria's "Stille Nacht"

The world's most famous Christmas song, "Silent Night," comes to us from Austria (*Österreich* in German). Called "Stille Nacht" in its original German, this beautiful Christmas carol is now sung and enjoyed around the world in over 140 languages.

A Christmas Carol Goes Around the World

But the familiar melody we recognize today as "Silent Night" or "Stille Nacht" is not quite the same one that Franz Gruber composed, and although the song was not truly "lost" or "forgotten" — as legend would have it — the world-famous carol did take many years to become as well known and as ubiquitous as it is today. In the intervening years Joseph Mohr is known to have written a "Stille Nacht" arrangement around 1820, and new hand-written arrangements by Franz Gruber appeared before his death — one for a full orchestra in 1845, and another for organ in 1855. By 1900 "Stille Nacht" had made its way around the entire globe. But we should start at the beginning.

On a cold Christmas Eve in 1818 pastor **Joseph Franz Mohr** (1792-1848) walked the three kilometers from his home in the Austrian village of Oberndorf bei Salzburg to visit his friend **Franz Xaver Gruber** (1787-1863) in the neighboring town of Arnsdorf bei Laufen. Mohr brought with him a poem he had written some two years earlier. He desperately needed a carol for the Christmas Eve midnight mass that was only hours away. He hoped his friend, a school teacher who also served as the church's choir master and organist, could set his poem to music. And one of the many amazing things about this carol is that Franz Gruber composed the "Stille Nacht" melody for Mohr in just a few hours on that December 24, 1818.

Recent flooding of the nearby Salzach river had put the church organ out of commission, so Gruber composed the music for guitar accompaniment. A few hours after Gruber finished his composition, he and Mohr stood before the altar of the St. Nicholas Church in Oberndorf to perform their own work. A local choir group backed them up as the sounds of the brand new carol broke the silence of that "Stille Nacht."

Because flooding had damaged its foundation, the St. Nicholas Church was demolished in the early 1900s. The Salzach river (which also flows through nearby Salzburg), has a tendency to flood. For this reason, the entire town of Oberndorf was relocated to a less flood-prone location some 800 meters upstream in the 1920s. Around the same time, a new parish church was constructed, and a small memorial chapel, the Stille-Nacht Gedächtniskapelle, replaced the original Nicola-Kirche.

For many years in the latter half of the 19th century, when the carol was beginning to become more popular, people who knew anything about "Stille Nacht" assumed the melody must have been composed by a more famous composer, possibly Beethoven, Haydn, or even Mozart. Although Gruber had made a written claim as the composer prior to his death in 1863, doubts lingered on into the 20th century. The question was officially settled only several years ago when an arrangement of "Stille Nacht" in Joseph Mohr's hand was authenticated. In the upper right-hand corner of the arrangement Mohr had written the words, "Melodie von Fr. Xav. Gruber."

"Stille Nacht" – The Song

Around 1832, when Gruber's melody was performed by folk singers from Austria's Ziller Valley (Zillertal), several musical notes were altered, and the "Silent Night" melody became what we know today. But Austria's Stille Nacht Gesellschaft (Silent Night Society) not only works to protect the Mohr-Gruber legacy—it encourages the use of the original notes that Gruber composed.

In Austria "Stille Nacht" is considered a national treasure. Traditionally the song may not be played publicly before Christmas Eve, and any commercial use of the 180-year-old carol is verboten. Contrast that with the situation in most other countries, where you are likely to hear "Silent Night" playing in the local shopping mall or

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even as part of a radio or TV commercial. Nevertheless, “Silent Night” enjoys a revered position among Christmas carols all over the world, no matter what it may be called or in which language it may be performed.

Franz Gruber was born on 25 Nov. 1787 in the Austrian town of Hochburg. He became a teacher and later moved to Arnsdorf. The rooms where he lived and worked can still be seen on the second floor of the Arnsdorf schoolhouse. In 1839 the Gruber family left Arnsdorf for Hallein, just south of Salzburg. His grave now lies next to the family’s former home there and is adorned with a Christmas tree each December.

Joseph Franz Mohr was born on 11 Dec. 1792 in Salzburg. He became a Catholic priest in August 1815. Mohr’s final resting place is in the tiny Alpine ski resort of Wagrain where he died penniless in 1848. He donated his modest earthly fortune for the education of the children in the community. Today the Joseph Mohr School stands as a fitting memorial—only yards away from the grave of the man who wrote the words heard round the world.

The first known performance of “Stille Nacht” in the United States took place near New York City’s Trinity Church. In 1839 the Rainer family singers of Austria included the German version of “Stille Nacht” in their repertoire during an appearance at the Alexander Hamilton Monument near the church, some 24 years before an English version of the carol would be published.

The “Silent Night” translation that we sing today in English first appeared in 1863—the year of Franz Gruber’s death, and some 45 years after the song’s initial performance in Austria. The English-language author was unknown until 1959, when it was determined to have been the Episcopal priest **John Freeman Young**, assigned at the time of his work to the same Trinity Church associated with the 1839 performance of “Stille Nacht.” Reverend Young apparently enjoyed translating European hymns and carols into English, and it is his 135-year-old “Silent Night” text that is found today in most hymnals and Christmas carol collections published in the English-speaking world.

. . . . Gleaned from *The German Way*