



Written by [Kurt Hyde](#) on December 24, 2018

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Silent Night — 200 Years Old and Still Going Strong

For the last 200 years, the Christmas song “Silent Night” has been enhancing the Christmas experiences for religious people all over the world. It even helped bring about a temporary peace in WWI. On Christmas Eve in 1914, the troops in the trenches of both the Allied Powers and Central Powers began singing Christmas carols. With the trenches of the opposing sides frequently being close enough that the troops on either side could hear each other, first one side would sing a carol, and then the other side would, singing carols that both sides often recognized, including “Silent Night, Holy Night,” or in German “Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht.” In one area of the front, the singing of that specific song was what brought the cultures together, reminding them that behind the guns the soldiers were all the same. Canada’s CBC News reported:



“It was impromptu, no one planned it,” Stanley Weintraub, the author of *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce*, told *Daybreak South’s* Chris Walker.

“It has to begin with something, and it did begin with elements of shared culture. If it hadn’t been for shared culture, certainly there would have been no Christmas truce.”

Weintraub said it started with German officer, Walter Kirchhoff, a tenor with the Berlin Opera.

“He came forward and sang *Silent Night* in German, and then in English. In the clear, cold night of Christmas Eve, his voice carried very far.

“The shooting had stopped and in that silence he sang and the British knew the song and sang back.”

... The song had a deep impact on many of the soldiers.

The morning after the singing took place, soldiers from both sides wished each other a merry Christmas and made arrangements to have a truce. Soldiers then emerged from the trenches, traded gifts with each other, kicked around makeshift soccer balls, and buried their dead. It is rumored that one British soldier even got a haircut from his pre-war German barber. It is estimated that as many as two-thirds of the troops on the front lines, nearly 100,000 men, participated in the truce, sometimes continuing the truce for many days.

That impactful song “Silent Night” made its debut on Christmas Eve 1818 at the St. Nikola Church in Oberndorf, Austria. The words for the song were written by Father Joseph Mohr in a poem in 1816, and on Christmas Eve Day, December 24, 1818, he asked his close friend, organist Franz Gruber, if he would compose a melody suitable for a guitar to put that poem to music and have it ready for a



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Christmas Eve service that night. In the 200 years since then, “Silent Night” has grown to be the most beloved of all Christmas carols. In the past few years, largely in preparation for the 200th anniversary, numerous researchers have been combing through archives and examining other records to learn more details about how this last-minute composition for a Christmas Eve church service became the great Christmas carol it has become.

Composers From Unlikely Backgrounds

Josephus Franciscus Mohr was born December 11, 1792 in Salzburg, Austria. He was the third of four children born out of wedlock to Anna Schoiber. He got his father’s surname, Mohr, based on Salzburgian law at that time. Anna Schoiber lived with her mother, and the two eked out a living knitting. An indication of Mohr’s lowly social status can be observed by his baptism. His godfather, Franz Joseph Wohlmuth, was Salzburg’s executioner. As Thomas Hochradner and Gerhard Walterkirchen noted in their book *Stille Nacht*, Wohlmuth “often took over sponsorship of illegitimate children. By doing this Wohlmuth tried to establish for himself a certain social status he did not have as an executioner.” Making matters worse for the innocent infant, Mohr’s father, Franz Mohr, a musketeer in the prince-archbishop’s army, was at that time a deserter, although he did eventually return to duty.

Despite Mohr’s incredibly bad start in life, things got better fast. It was apparent in his early years that he was a gifted child, both academically and musically. Because most reports of Mohr’s early life are associated with church activities and religious people, it appears he had a strong, morally right upbringing. He got financial help from the cathedral choir curate, Johann Hiernle, and he earned money as a singer and as an instrumentalist at a number of churches. That enabled him to study at the lyzeum (grammar school) in Salzburg, and then he studied philosophy at the lyzeum in Kremsmünster. In 1811, Mohr entered seminary, and he was ordained on August 21, 1815.

Father Mohr had short assignments at Ramsau and Mariapfarr before being assigned to the St. Nikola church in Oberndorf, Austria, in August of 1817, where he worked under Father Joseph Kessler, a priest for whom he had worked in Mariapfarr. Unfortunately, Kessler was soon replaced by Father Georg Heinrich Nöstler, a priest with whom Mohr did not have a good relationship. Based on the complaints filed by Nöstler to the Salzburg Consistory, it would appear Nöstler was stoical, and Mohr was close to the people and considered more of a people’s priest.

It was while serving at the St. Nikola church in Oberndorf that Mohr met and became friends with Franz Gruber, who was an organist and choirmaster. That friendship would be pivotal in the collaboration for the Christmas carol “Silent Night.”

Franz Xaver Gruber was born November 25, 1787, son of Joseph and Anna Gruber. The elder Gruber was a linen weaver and hoped his son would follow in his footsteps, but the boy had a strong interest in music. The boy’s musical talents were noticed early in his life by his teacher Andreas Peterlechner, while Gruber was in school in Hochburg. Peterlechner helped convince the elder Gruber that his son should attend teacher-training college. The younger Gruber continued his study of music under Georg Hartdobler, an organist at a parish in nearby Burghausen.

Gruber went to a teacher-training college and became an assistant school teacher in Hochburg. Once he completed the stipulated time as an assistant teacher, he was offered a position as a teacher in Arnsdorf. In order to accept the position, he was required to marry the widow of his predecessor in that



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position, so he married Elizabeth Fischinger.

In 1816, probably in order to augment his income, Gruber took an additional job as an organist at the St. Nikola church in Oberndorf, where he met and became friends with Joseph Mohr.

First a Poem, Then a Christmas Carol

The words of the Christmas carol we now know as “Silent Night” were originally a poem written by Mohr in 1816 while he was in Mariapfarr. The original title is not known because the original copy has been lost. In its original form, it had six verses. The words used most frequently in the United States today consist of English translations of three of those verses — the first, the sixth, and the second.

The melody was written for guitar accompaniment, though the church had an organ, bringing about many legends about the organ at the St. Nikola church and why it wasn’t used for the performance of “Silent Night” on Christmas Eve of 1818. One persistent rumor is that a mouse chewed on the bellows and rendered the organ inoperative. Researchers have found no evidence to support that. It is possible that the organ was having problems, perhaps not fully functioning.

Some researchers believe there was nothing malfunctioning in the organ that evening, and the reasons for performing “Silent Night” to guitar chords were owing to other factors, such as Father Mohr’s desire to add something of interest to enhance the Christmas Eve church service. No one knows for sure. It is possible there was something wrong with the organ at the church, if not on Christmas Eve of 1818, certainly later, because Karl Mauracher, an organ builder from Zillertal, came to the St. Nikola Church in Oberndorf to work on the organ in 1819, and he built a new one in 1825.

Whatever the exact state of the organ, or the reason for the request to compose a melody, it has been well established that Father Mohr handed a copy of his poem to his friend Franz Gruber on December 24, 1818, and asked him if he would compose a suitable melody for it using a guitar as an instrument, to be performed that night, and Gruber accomplished it despite the short notice. Mohr sang the tenor portion and played the guitar. Gruber sang the bass portion, and the refrains were sung by the choir. There is plenty of evidence that “Silent Night” was performed on subsequent dates by both Mohr and Gruber.

In 1995, the Salzburg Museum was presented with what is currently the earliest known authentic copy of “Silent Night.” It was written by Mohr himself and has been dated to around 1820. It has all six verses and is entitled “Weyhnachts-Lied,” a now antiquated spelling of Weihnachtslied, which translates to “Christmas Carol,” and is written in a musical format. There are also a few authenticated copies of “Silent Night” in different musical arrangements handwritten by Franz Gruber. The title “Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht” (“Silent Night, Holy Night”) appears to have been added by subsequent authors.

Mohr was transferred to a different parish in 1819 and was transferred multiple times after. Frequent transfers were not unusual for young priests. In 1837, Mohr was transferred to Wagrain, where he served as a curate until his untimely death due to pulmonary palsy on December 4, 1848, one week before what would have been his 56th birthday. Bill Egan, a Christmas historian, noted that Mohr died penniless because he donated all of his earnings to care for the elderly and to put children through school.

Gruber remained in Oberndorf for a number of years after Mohr was transferred. After his first wife died in 1826, he married Maria Breitfuss, a former pupil of his. In 1827, someone else was given the



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position of sexton, and apparently Gruber was unhappy about it. In 1829, he accepted a position as a teacher in Berndorf. In 1835, he accepted a position as organist and choirmaster in Hallein, where he stayed until his death on June 7, 1863.

How “Silent Night” Spread to the World

Both Mohr and Gruber shared their composition with their immediate church families, as well as other teachers and organists, allowing them to make copies. Neither of them appeared to have seen this as a business opportunity. Karl Mauracher, an organ builder from Zillertal, is generally credited with being the first person to take a handwritten copy of the new Christmas carol from Oberndorf to Zillertal, which served as the springboard to international popularity. Musical groups from the Tyrolian region were generally popular in many European capitals at that time because the people in the Tyrolian area had revolted against Napoleon in 1809, and such people, even though their revolt was unsuccessful, were viewed with respect for at least having tried.

Once introduced in the Zillertal area, the song was sung by a number of singing groups from the area, including the Strasser Family, glovemakers who included musical performances in addition to exhibiting their wares. It is believed that the Strasser Family was the first to innovate the Christmas carol by singing only verses one, six, and two. They did this at a fair in Leipzig, Germany, in 1831 and 1832. This is a popular format, even today.

Another singing group from the Zillertal area, the Rainer Singers, also did many public performances of the Christmas carol in Germany and other countries, including one in front of Trinity Church in New York on Christmas Day of 1839. That is believed to be the song’s first public performance in America.

Episcopal Bishop John Freeman Young is credited with translating the Christmas carol into English in 1859. Like the Strasser Family’s innovation, this was in the format of verses one, six, and two. There are reports of earlier English translations, but modern-day researchers haven’t found documentary evidence to support them.

Search for the Composers

“Silent Night” grew in popularity despite its not having an official title or listing the names of its composers. In 1854, it captured the attention and curiosity of some very important people in Berlin, Prussia (now Berlin, Germany), possibly King Friedrich Wilhelm IV himself. The Royal Prussian Court Chapel in Berlin sent an official inquiry to St. Peter’s Abbey in Salzburg, Austria, asking if they knew the composer of the Christmas carol. They suspected it might have been Johann Michael Haydn, younger brother of the famous composer Joseph Haydn.

When the inquiry got to Salzburg, Franz Gruber learned of it, most likely via his son Felix, who was at that time a choirboy at St. Peter’s Abbey. Franz Gruber, obviously suddenly realizing the magnitude of his and Mohr’s composition, wrote a two-page response entitled “Authentic Inducement for Composing the Wide-Spread Christmas Carol: ‘Silent Night, Holy Night.’” In it he identified the composers. He also referred to the Christmas carol as “Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht,” but did not state specifically what the title was on Mohr’s poem or what title they used for it at the time of the first performance on Christmas Eve of 1818.

Franz Gruber got to experience the joy of being recognized for his part in composing “Stille Nacht,



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Heilige Nacht." Unfortunately, Mohr had died about six years earlier. There is a portrait of Franz Gruber that was painted by Sebastian Stief in 1846. There is no known portrait of Joseph Mohr, a man who was underappreciated most of his life. Any portraits of him are artists' conceptions. Two men, both from lowly beginnings, accomplished something great, much like the life of the Christ child whom they honored with their musical composition.

The Stille Nacht Kapelle (Silent Night Chapel) is a memorial chapel in Oberndorf, Austria. It was built on the exact location where the original St. Nikola church was. There is a Christmas Eve service every year that includes a re-creation of the original performance of "Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht" as it was in 1818. There is also a museum on the premises. The New American would like to thank the staff at the Stille Nacht Kapelle Museum for their assistance in the research for this article.

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