

## Silent Night

The words for the song “Silent Night” were first composed as a poem in the German/Austrian language in 1816, by Josef Mohr. In 1818, Mohr collaborated with Franz Gruber who wrote the music. The Silent Night Association researches, preserves and disseminates historical information about “Silent Night.”

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### Lyrics (in English)

Silent night, holy night.  
All is calm, all is bright  
Round yon virgin mother and child  
Holy infant so tender and mild  
Sleep in heavenly peace  
Sleep in heavenly peace

Silent night, holy night.  
Shepherds quake at the sight,

Glories stream from heaven afar,  
Heav'nly hosts sing alleluia:  
Christ the Saviour is born,  
Christ the Saviour is born.

Silent night, holy night  
Son of God, love's pure light,  
Radiant beams from thy holy face,  
With the dawn of redeeming grace:  
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth,  
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth.

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### Silent Night

Joseph Mohr was born on December 11, 1792, in Salzburg, Austria to a poor spinster knitter, Anna Schoiber. His father, Franz Joseph Mohr, served in the army as one of the archbishop's musketeers and left Anna and his son to fend for themselves.

While his exact place of birth is unknown, church records show he was born in the "Old Town" near the cathedral (the Dom), where he was baptized a few hours later. The youngster grew up in another area of the city (the "New Town") across the Salzach River. He was raised in extreme

poverty in a small room at 31 Steingasse where he and his mother lived with his elderly grandmother. *(This information was found in census records in 1998 by historian Manfred Fischer.)*

Joseph's godfather was Franz Joseph Wohlmuth, the town's executioner. The cathedral choir-master, Johann Nepomuk Hiernle, became a foster-father to the young student, and recognizing his musical talent saw to it that he received a proper education. Joseph attended classes at the famous grammar school in Kremsmünster, Upper Austria, where he received honors for his work.

Joseph Mohr completed his education at the archdiocesan seminary in Salzburg and was ordained as a priest on August 21, 1815. His first assignment took him to Mariapfarr in the Lungau region of the Salzburg province. While working at the pilgrim church in Mariapfarr, it is assumed that he had opportunity to meet with his grandfather who lived in Stranach, a village which is a 30 minute walk to the south.

During his service in the Alpine village, Joseph produced a poem, "**Stille Nacht! Heilige Nacht!**" The German words for the original six stanzas of the carol we know as "**Silent Night**" were written by Joseph Mohr in 1816, when he was a young priest assigned to a pilgrimage church in Mariapfarr, Austria. His grandfather lived nearby, and it is easy to imagine that he could have come up with the words while walking thorough the countryside on a visit to his elderly relative. The fact is, we have no idea if any particular event inspired Joseph Mohr to pen his poetic version of the birth of the Christchild. The world is fortunate, however, that he didn't leave it behind when he was transferred to Oberndorf the following year (1817).

Due to poor health, he was sent to Salzburg for hospitalization and when he recovered, was assigned to St. Nicholas Church in Oberndorf (1817). It was there that the assistant pastor met and became friends with the Arnsdorf schoolmaster and church verger, Franz Xaver Gruber, who also served as organist at St. Nicholas.

On December 24, 1818, Fr. Joseph Mohr, took a 20 minute walk to the home of musician-schoolteacher Franz Gruber in Arnsdorf and changed the tenor of Christmas musical celebrations forever. (Fr. Mohr lived on the upper floor at the far end of this building during his assignment to St. Nicholas Church in Oberndorf. It is located behind the Silent Night Memorial Chapel.)

An account of the creation of the world's best-loved Christmas carol can be seen in the Franz Gruber Gallery, in Gruber's own words. What we don't know is why the carol was composed. A story in the early 20th century claimed that the church organ was not working but there are no church or diocesan records to back up this claim.

In a 1967 book there is a silly tale of mice eating the organ bellows (easily repaired). He showed his friend the poem and asked him to add a melody and guitar accompaniment so that it could be sung at Midnight Mass. His reason for wanting the new carol is unknown. Some speculate that the organ would not work; others feel that the assistant pastor, who dearly loved guitar music, merely wanted a new carol for Christmas. After a great deal of research, most historians feel that Fr. Mohr, due to his love of guitar music, simply wanted a new Christmas carol that he could

play on his guitar. One modern-day writer, hoping to sell a film script, claims that Gruber most likely was responsible for the organ not working. Perhaps this is a way of placing conflict into a filmscript, but it doesn't help serious historians.

The story is simple and needs no embellishment. Joseph Mohr wrote the poem in 1816 and Franz Gruber wrote the music on Christmas Eve in 1818.

In 1819, Fr. Mohr was transferred from Oberndorf and somewhere between that time and 1821 he wrote out an arrangement of the carol. This document was discovered in 1995 and, after it was authenticated by handwriting experts and historians, has been proclaimed the earliest known manuscript of "Stille Nacht." In addition, it disproves the claims of some critics who felt that Michael Haydn had actually written the music. Fr. Mohr gives full credit to his friend Gruber, for in the upperhand right corner he wrote "Melodie von Fr. Xav. Gruber."

Joseph Mohr never forgot his collaboration with Franz Gruber. An article in the old "Salzburg Chronik" tells of a visit by some seminarians to Wagrain, where Fr. Mohr was pastor. It reads as follows:

Invited once again with other students (Franz Goichl, Johann Wachthoser) to stay with the hospitable Rev. Joseph Mohr in Wagrain, a blessed state of mind was fostered in us by the poet who brought 'Silent Night' to life. He gave thanks and said that for him one of the most precious moments of his life was shortly before Christmas 1818, when he spoke to Mr. Franz Gruber about a joint effort.

"The two of us did something for the Holy Night. I transcribed the words and Franz Gruber the melodie," These were always the words the Rev. Mohr said.

The article goes on to say that the seminarians drank a toast to the two men who created the carol with Joseph Mohr joining the salute to his good friend, Gruber.

Karl Mauracher, a master organ builder and repairman from the Ziller Valley, traveled to Oberndorf to work on the organ, several times in subsequent years. While doing his work in St. Nicholas, he obtained a copy of the composition and took it home with him. Thus, the simple carol, began its journey around the world as a "Tyrolean Folk Song."

Two traveling families of folk singers from the Ziller Valley, similar to the Trapp Family Singers of "The Sound of Music" fame, incorporated the song into their repertoire. According to the Leipziger Tageblatt, the Strassers sang the song in a concert in Leipzig in December 1832. It was during this period, several musical notes were changed, and the carol evolved into the melody we know today. On another occasion, according to an historical plaque, the Rainer Family sang the Christmas carol before an audience which included Emperor Franz I and Tsar Alexander I. In the year 1839, the Rainers performed "Stille Nacht" for the first time in America, at the Alexander Hamilton Monument outside Trinity Church in New York City.

Joseph Bletzacher, the Court Opera singer from Hannover, reported that by the 1840s, the carol was already well known in Lower Saxony. "In Berlin," he says, "the Royal Cathedral Choir

popularized it especially. It became in fact the favorite Christmas carol of the artistically appreciative King Frederick William IV of Prussia, who used to have the Cathedral Choir sing it for him during the Christmas season each year."

By the time the song had become famous throughout Europe, the Joseph Mohr had died and the composer was unknown. Although Franz Gruber wrote to music authorities in Berlin stating that he was the composer, the melody had been assumed to be the work of Haydn, Mozart or Beethoven at various times and these thoughts persisted even into the twentieth century. The controversy was put to rest four years ago when a long-lost arrangement of "Stille Nacht" in the hand of Joseph Mohr was authenticated. In the upper right hand corner of the arrangement, Mohr wrote, "Melodie von Fr. Xav. Gruber."

During his lifetime, Franz Xaver Gruber produced a number of orchestral arrangements of his composition. The original guitar arrangement is missing, but five other Gruber manuscripts of the carol exist. The manuscript by Joseph Mohr (ca. 1820) is for guitar accompaniment and is probably the closest to the arrangement and melody sung at Midnight Mass in 1818.

Later in his life, the Gruber family moved to Hallein, now the site of the Franz Xaver Gruber Museum. It contains several furnished rooms in his former home along with outstanding exhibits dealing with the history of "**Silent Night**," including Joseph Mohr's guitar. Gruber's grave is outside the home and is decorated with a Christmas tree in December.

Fr. Joseph Mohr's final resting place is a tiny Alpine ski resort, Wagrain. He was born into poverty in Salzburg in 1792 and died penniless in Wagrain in 1848, where he had been assigned as pastor of the church. He had donated all his earnings to be used for eldercare and the education of the children in the area. His memorial from the townspeople is the Joseph Mohr School located a dozen yards from his grave. The overseer of St. Johann's, in a report to the bishop, described Mohr as "a reliable friend of mankind, toward the poor, a gentle, helping father."

In 1998 it was discovered that Joseph Mohr was not born in the building once thought to be his birthplace at 9 Steingasse in Salzburg. Research into the census records indicates that Mohr and his mother resided at 31 Steingasse. At the same time the Governor of Salzburg, Franz Schausberger, announced a new initiative to promote the cultural sites related to the carol and its composers.

It seems that Austria has finally realized that their national treasure has a very special significance outside its birth nation and has become "The Song Heard 'Round The World."

Perhaps this is part of the miracle of "Silent Night." The words flowed from the imagination of a modest curate. The music was composed by a musician who was not known outside his village. There was no celebrity to sing at its world premiere. Yet its powerful message of heavenly peace has crossed all borders and language barriers, conquering the hearts of people everywhere.

St. Nicholas Church ( Nicola-Kirche) was demolished in the early 1900s due to [flood](#) damage and because the town's centre was moved up the river to a safer location, with a new church

being built there close to the new bridge. A tiny chapel, called the "[Stille-Nacht-Gedächtniskapelle](#)" ([Silent Night Memorial Chapel](#)), was built in the place of the demolished church and a nearby house was converted into a museum, attracting tourists from all over the world, not only but primarily in December.

The melody of "**Silent Night**" bears resemblance to aspects of Austrian [folk music](#) and [yodelling](#). It is believed that the carol has been translated into over 300 languages and dialects around the world, and it is one of the most popular carols of all time. It is sometimes sung without musical accompaniment. Although written by Catholics, it is given special significance in Lutheranism.

The song was sung simultaneously in English and German by troops during the [Christmas truce](#)<sup>[2]</sup> of 1914, as it was one of the few carols that soldiers on both sides of the front line knew.

The song has been successfully recorded by over 300 artists, particularly successful by [Bing Crosby](#) and [Mahalia Jackson](#).

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### **Silent Night Association**

Ever since Austrian organ-builder Karl Mauracher, provided some traveling folk singers with an arrangement of "Silent Night," the world has been singing the wrong melody. Somewhere between the time the "Silent Night" melody was first set down on paper by Franz Xaver Gruber in 1818 and when Mauracher presented it to the Rainer Family and the Strasser Family in Austria's Ziller Valley, several notes were lost from the melody and several others were changed.

For many years, the Silent Night Association, in Oberndorf, Austria has been trying to promote the use of the original Franz Xaver Gruber melody. Despite "urban legends" which claim that the carol was forgotten by the composers after its first performance, there are several Gruber arrangements of the carol and one arrangement by the man who wrote the words, Fr. Joseph Mohr. Manuscript arrangements of the hymn are in the possession of museums in Salzburg and Hallein. The Mohr arrangement (ca. 1820) is kept at the [Carolino Augusteum Museum](#) in [Salzburg](#). The earliest (ca. 1820) is an arrangement by Joseph Mohr. This is the earliest [manuscript](#) that exists and the only one in Mohr's handwriting. Gruber's composition was influenced by the musical tradition of his rural domicile.

In addition there are five existing arrangements in the hand of Franz Gruber up through 1855. Although the original 1818 manuscript is missing, the possibility exists that it could resurface in the way that the Mohr manuscript was discovered in 1995.

Since 1998, choral directors around the globe have been printing out an 1855 Franz Gruber arrangement of "Stille Nacht" for soloists, choir and organ, which was made available at no charge via the Internet. Once again people everywhere can print out the sheet music to share (free) with their church choirs and community or school choral groups.

The Silent Night Association is a non-profit organization dedicated to the goal of disseminating **authentic** information about "Silent Night" all over the world. One of the main goals of the association is to become the "Information Desk" for all questions relating to "Silent Night." The association also strives to make the public aware that the first performance of the world's best-loved carol took place in Austria. Through the association, the research conducted by historians is made available to writers and historians on a world-wide basis.

At one time, correcting the misinformation about "Silent Night" seemed like an impossible task, however, the Internet enables the Silent Night Association to reach out to individuals, organizations and media outlets around the globe. For many years, the fact that the original melody is slightly different from the popular 20th Century version was unknown outside the Salzburg area. Through the Internet, choirs around the world have become aware of the original Franz Gruber arrangements.

Research continues regarding the carol and its composers. The association promotes the research activities and helps to provide some of the needed funds. In 1998, historian Manfred Fischer, searched through ancient archives and dusty records to prove, beyond a reasonable doubt, that the site *thought* to be the birthplace of Joseph Mohr, at 9 Steingasse, was invalid. It was also discovered that Mohr lived for a time on the same street, at 31 Steingasse, and was most likely born on the other side of the Salzach River since he was baptised on the day of his birth in the Salzburg Cathedral Parish (The Dom).

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## **Franz Gruber**

**Franz Xaver Gruber** ([November 25, 1787](#)–[June 7, 1863](#)), was an [Austrian](#) primary school teacher and church organist in the village of Arnsdorf. At the same time he was organist and choirmaster at St. Nicholas Church in the neighboring village of Oberndorf and then in later years moved on to [Hallein](#), [Salzburg](#).

Together with [Josef Mohr](#) (original German lyrics), a Catholic priest, Gruber composed the [Christmas carol](#) *Silent Night*. On December 24, 1818, Mohr, an assistant pastor at St. Nicholas, showed Gruber a six-stanza poem he had written in 1816. He asked Gruber to write a melody and guitar arrangement for the poem. At Christmas Mass, while Mohr played his guitar, the two men sang "Stille Nacht" for the first time. The St. Nicholas choir repeated the last two lines of each verse.

In later years, Gruber wrote additional arrangements of the carol for organ and for organ with orchestra. He wrote dozens of other carols and masses. Many are still in print and are sung today in Austrian churches.

Although he is mostly known outside Austria as the composer of "Stille Nacht," Franz Gruber produced many other musical works. His hymns and masses are still sung by Austrian choirs and many are available in booklet form from the Silent Night cultural sites in Oberndorf and Hallein.

Gruber's "German Mass in D" was sung at Midnight Mass 1998 at the University Church in Salzburg.

### Hymns and Mass Excerpts

by Franz Xaver Gruber

Silent Night lyrics by Fr. Joseph Mohr - 1816

Silent Night melody by Franz Xaver Gruber – 1818

Joseph Mohr's 1820 arrangement

Gruber's 1845 arrangement for orchestra

Franz Gruber's 1855 arrangement for organ

Carillon sequence

Franz Gruber's "Heiligste Nacht"

Gruber's "Gloria" from Mass in D

Gruber's "Kyrie" from Mass in D

Stille Nacht vocal replicates 1818 performance

Hans Hoffman (1903-Edison) via Real Audio

Stille Nacht vocal - 20th Cent. Version

In 1998, Franz Gruber's original melody went far beyond the borders of Austria. The notes that were lost and changed over the years were restored to their rightful place on the music staff through the power of the Internet. Gruber's 1855 arrangement for organ and choir was posted on websites in Germany, South Africa, Australia, Canada and the United States. Choirs in various nations printed out copies and the Gruber melody was heard at concerts and church services around the globe.

The Netherlands Radio Boys Choir made history when they held a special recording session to present the Gruber melody on the Internet. People from all over the world visited their website to hear their rendition of the world's best-loved Christmas carol.

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### **Josef Mohr**

**Josef Mohr** ([December 11, 1792](#) – [December 4, 1848](#)) was an [Austrian](#) priest and composer, who wrote the words to the [Christmas carol](#) "[Silent Night](#)".

Josef Franz Mohr was born in [Salzburg](#) on [December 11, 1792](#), to an unmarried embroiderer, Anna Schoiberin, and a mercenary soldier, Franz Mohr who deserted the army and Josef's mother before the birth.

As his musical talent was not recognized, he found a sponsor to set him upon the path to higher education. As an illegitimate child he needed the pope's special permission to study for the priesthood and was ordained a priest in 1815. Rev. Mohr was sent to a pilgrim church in the

remote Alpine village of [Mariapfarr](#), where in 1816 he wrote a six-stanza poem that was to become the world's most popular carol.

Mohr was moved to [Oberndorf](#) in 1817 to stay there for two years. When [Franz Gruber](#) agreed to compose a melody and guitar arrangement for the poem to be sung at midnight mass on [December 24, 1818](#), 'Silent Night' was born. Within a few short years, arrangements of the carol appeared in churches in the Salzburg Diocese and folk singers from the Ziller Valley were taking the song on tours around Europe.

Until 2006, it was thought that Mohr and Gruber had collaborated on just one song. Now another song has been located in the Wagrain parish archive by the Salzburg Diocesan Archives. "Te Deum" with text by Joseph Mohr and melody by Franz Xaver Gruber can be heard in an audio exhibit at the Waggerl Museum in Wagrain.

Mohr, a generous man who donated most of his salary to charity, was moved from place to place and finally became parish pastor in [Wagrain](#), where he founded a new school for children. He created a fund to allow children from poor families to attend school and he set up a system for the care of the elderly.

Father Mohr died of a pulmonary disease on December 4, 1848. The village school is named after him and his grave has been kept in a place of honor in the nearby churchyard cemetery. An outdoor exhibit detailing the life of Josef Mohr is situated on the walkway between the church and the parish house where he once lived. In 2006, the town's Waggerl Museum set up a new permanent exhibit -- *Josef Mohr - Vicar of Wagrain*.

Joseph Mohr served ten years in the parish at Wagrain, now a beautiful Alpine [ski](#) resort. *See photo album*. He was greatly loved by the people in his area, and when he died, December 4, 1848, he was as poor as when he entered the world having given all his earnings to the education of the youth in the parish and the care of the elderly. The Joseph Mohr School is located across the street from his grave in the churchyard at Wagrain.

- Dec. 11, 1792 - Josef Mohr is born in Salzburg, Austria
- Aug. 21, 1815 - Ordained to the priesthood in Salzburg
- 1816 - As a curate in Mariapfarr, Fr. Mohr writes a poem, "Stille Nacht! Heilige Nacht!"
- 1817 - Due to illness, Fr. Mohr is sent to Salzburg for a hospital stay.
- 1817 - Fr. Mohr is appointed assistant pastor at St. Nicholas Church in Oberndorf
- Dec. 24, 1818 - With a melody added by Franz X. Gruber, "Stille Nacht" is first sung at Midnight Mass in Oberndorf
- 1819 - Fr. Mohr is transferred from Oberndorf to parish assignments at Kuchl, Golling, Vigaun, Adnet, Anthering, Eugendorf and Hof
- 1828 - Fr. Mohr is appointed pastor of the parish at Hintersee
- 1838 - Joseph Mohr is appointed pastor of the parish at Wagrain
- Dec. 4, 1848 - Fr. Mohr dies from a lung disease and is buried in the churchyard at Wagrain

Samantha Mohr, a meteorologist at the Weather Channel, is a descendant of Father Mohr. Josef Michael Mohr, who owns a bowling center in OBX NC, is a descendent.

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### Audio Links and Discography

*If you subscribe to iTunes, BuyMusic, Rhapsody or a similar service, keyword in “Silent Night” and then you can listen to a sample from each artist.*

### *YouTubes*

Original Version, Netherlands Radio Boys Choir:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V6gnRvumDiA>

Celtic Woman: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JtQr81k3Tsk>

Bing Crosby: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5-2Tnp9whDU>

Mahalia Jackson [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RY1\\_fUL022g](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RY1_fUL022g)

Enya: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sx2j5vKUD2U>

Nat King Cole: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tht9KD\\_pB0U](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tht9KD_pB0U)

Andre Rieu & Children’s Choir: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b7Jk85BzEI8>

Three Tenors: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g9YFCVmGIHs>

Johnny Cash, His Mother and Friends: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x2FYz\\_13JNM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x2FYz_13JNM)

Elvis Presley: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZVB2Szej6e4>

Tammy Wynette: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sAVW992EQY4>

Olivia Newton-John: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9jasBRP-biA>

Pat Boone: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EHFniWc0ZLg>

Dean Martin: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mgro6XcL1-s>

*These select recordings can be purchased online:*

Josh Groban: <http://www.amazon.com/Silent-Night-Album-Version/dp/B00122IOX0>

Frank Sinatra: <http://www.amazon.com/Silent-Night-1999-Digital-Remaster/dp/B000VTW3TG>

Bing Crosby: <http://www.amazon.com/Silent-Night/dp/B000W096UI>

Nat King Cole: <http://www.amazon.com/Silent-Night-1999-Digital-Remaster/dp/B000TE39IW>

Celtic Woman: <http://www.amazon.com/Silent-Night/dp/B000TED0WC>

Mariah Carey: <http://www.amazon.com/Silent-Night/dp/B0017DCAS4>

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### References:

The above article about the song “**Silent Night**” was extracted from these websites. For more information, please read the articles:

<http://www.fortunecity.com/victorian/museum/59/mohr.html>  
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