

Silent Night

December 2012 - Hymn of the Month



The Hymn



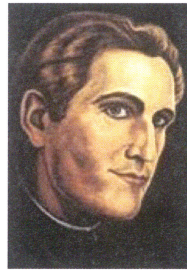
It would be difficult to imagine the Christmas season without this hymn. It has been part of Christmas traditions for many generations.

As most know, the text of *Silent Night* was originally written in German. It is instructive to note that the author and composer had been witnesses to the events of the Napoleonic wars which ended in 1815 and caused much suffering in the area where they lived.

A number of variations of the account of the writing of the hymn exist, however, an account written by the composer in 1854 states that on Christmas Eve of 1818 the assistant priest, Joseph Mohr, at the newly established parish of St. Nicholas in Oberndorf, Austria, handed the church organist, Franz Gruber, a poem and requested that he write a fitting melody for two solo voices, choir and guitar. Later that day, Franz Gruber presented Joseph Mohr with his composition, and he liked what he saw. The song was included in the Christmas Mass that evening, with Mohr singing the tenor and accompanying on the guitar, and Gruber singing the bass. It was well received.

A score discovered in recent years autographed by Joseph Mohr, identifies the date of the writing of the text as two years prior to the music, 1816, and confirms the composer as Franz Gruber. After its first performance in Oberndorf, the song spread to churches and schools around the area. Evidently the handwritten copies soon left off the names of its creators as by 1854 they had been forgotten. That year investigations

The Author



Josephus Franciscus Mohr was born in December of 1792 at Salzburg, Austria to an embroiderer and a soldier. His father deserted the army and abandoned his mother before his birth. His

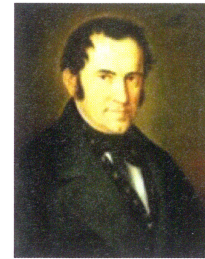
early life was one of poverty until the Vicar and leader of music at the Salzburg Cathedral took an interest in him and enabled young Joseph to have an education. It is believed that Joseph served as a choir singer and a violinist in his childhood. He was also a student, eventually entering the seminary by a special dispensation due to his illegitimate birth. It is said that he graduated in 1815 and was ordained a priest.

His first assignment is believed to have been a short time in the village of Ramsau, he then served as assistant priest in Mariapfarr, south of Salzburg, until 1817. It is said that it was during his time here that he wrote the text for *Stille Nacht* (*Silent Night*.)

Illness caused Joseph to return to Salzburg to recover his health. Later in 1817 he began serving as assistant priest in Oberndorf, north of Salzburg. During this time he worked with Franz Gruber who was serving as organist at both Oberndorf and Ansdorf and the song they created for Christmas Mass in 1818, *Silent Night*, is now sung across the world.

It was not uncommon for young priests to move frequently at that time, and it is said that his relationship with the parish priest became tense, and he was accused of "singing songs which do not edify," among other unfounded criticisms, so

The Composer



Franz Xaver Gruber was born in November of 1787 at Hochburg, Austria, about 30 miles north of Salzburg. It is said that he was the fifth of the six children of linen weavers Josef

and Maria Gruber. As was the custom at the time, Franz was expected to learn his father's trade, however, his musical talents were apparent and the village schoolteacher, Andreas Peterlechner, gave him music lessons.

At age eighteen he left weaving with his father's blessing and pursued a career as a schoolteacher, which often included also serving as church organist. It is said that he studied organ with the church organist of Burghausen, and studied teaching with his own schoolteacher, passing his exams in 1806 to become a public schoolteacher.

His first position was in 1807 at Arnsdorf, about fourteen miles north of Salzburg, where he served as schoolteacher, church caretaker and organist. In 1816 he added the duties of organist at the newly formed parish of Oberndorf, about two miles away. This led to his association with Joseph Mohr and the composition of the music for *Silent Night* on Christmas Eve, 1818. It is said that Franz Gruber himself characterized the song as merely "a simple composition."

In 1829 Franz Gruber moved his family to Berndorf to assume the teaching and church caretaking jobs there, then in 1835 was named choir director, singer and organist for the parish church of Hallein, where it is said he built up the church choir with zeal.

were undertaken to discover the original creators and an inquiry was made by the Royal Prussian Court Chapel in Berlin. Franz Gruber, then in his late sixties, wrote a response with an "Authentic Account" of the origin of the song. In 1866 *Stille Nacht* (*Silent Night*) was included in the official songbook of the church. It made its way to Europe by means of the Rainer and Strasser singing families. It is believed that the first performance in America was by the Rainer family in 1839 at New York City.

Silent Night has since been translated into hundreds of languages. There have been a number of English translations of the poem since it was written 194 years ago; however, the English text most familiar today was translated by Episcopalian Bishop John F. Young and is believed to have been first published in his 1859 pamphlet *Carols for Christmas Tide*. It proceeded to many other publications and from 1887 to 1957 John F. Young's association with the text was lost. At that time the trail was carefully traced by an Episcopalian Rector, Reverend Underwood, and the authorship restored.

The original work has six verses. The most commonly sung in English today are the first, sixth and second, in that order. The other verses speak of the Father's love pouring forth and Jesus embracing the people of the world, of Jesus in human form being heaven's abundant mercy made visible to us, and salvation long planned coming forth to free us from wrath.

The task of translating the poetry of a song is a difficult one. To convey the meaning of the words as well as creating a rhythm to match the music and rhyming the text requires a thorough mastery of both languages and a musical and poetical ability as well. It is understandable that a number of the English lines are somewhat different than the original German. For instance, a literal translation of the first verse would be:

Quiet night! Holy night!
All are sleeping, lonely sentry
Just the intimate holy pair

Joseph moved on in 1819, eventually serving in eleven different parishes. He is said to have been diligent in his attention to the poor and needy, and was instrumental in the construction of a school in Wagrain in 1838.

Joseph Mohr died in December of 1848, just before his 56th birthday. He left a lasting testament of his faith in the text of *Stille Nacht*, even though at the time of his death, his authorship of *Silent Night* had been forgotten.

The Translator



John Freeman Young was born in October of 1820, at Pittston, Maine to John and Emma Freeman Young. He attended

Wesleyan University in Connecticut for a year, then after converting to the Episcopal Church went south to Alexandria, Virginia to study at Virginia Theological Seminary. It is said that he graduated in 1845, was ordained a deacon and began his service at St. John's church in Jacksonville, Florida. Less than a year later, he was ordained a priest at St. John's Church in Tallahassee, Florida. His early career saw him moving frequently, from Florida to Texas, Mississippi, Louisiana, and New York City. Besides theology, he had interests in architecture and hymnology. During his time in New York, he collected and translated many great Christian hymns of various churches. As mentioned above, in 1859 Reverend Young published the 16 page pamphlet, *Carols for Christmas Tide*, the first carol being his translation of *Silent Night*.

In 1867 he was consecrated as Bishop of Florida. Thereafter he traveled extensively throughout the diocese by horseback, in carts, on steamboats and on foot, building up the church that had been devastated by the effects of the Civil War. He established churches and schools and was influential in the architecture of the churches that were built throughout his diocese. He was interested in all people, and established a Spanish language parish for Cuban

Franz Gruber died of natural causes in June of 1863 at the age of 76. His longevity was rather remarkable considering he had buried two wives and eight children. Four children lived to adulthood. His second son carried on his work with the choir at Hallein.

Choirs around the world still carry on his music with *Silent Night*.

Silent Night – Text 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 Savior is born!
Christ, the Savior 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.

Silent Night – Text in German

Stille Nacht! Heilige Nacht!
Alles schläft; einsam wacht
Nur das traute heilige Paar.
Holder Knab im lockigten Haar,
Schlafe in himmlischer Ruh!
Schlafe in himmlischer Ruh!

Stille Nacht! Heilige Nacht!
Hirten erst kundgemacht
Durch der Engel Alleluja,
Tönt es laut bei Ferne und Nah;
Jesus der Retter ist da!
Jesus der Retter ist da!

Stille Nacht! Heilige Nacht!
Gottes Sohn! O wie lacht
Lieb' aus deinem göttlichen Mund,
Da schlägt uns die rettende Stund'.
Jesus, in deiner Geburt!
Jesus, in deiner Geburt!

Fair boy with curling hair
Sleep in heavenly peace;
Sleep in heavenly peace.

immigrants. It is believed that he also
published a pamphlet of twenty-five
hymns in the Spanish language.

We owe nearly as much credit to the
translator as to the author for the familiar
English words we hold so dear. The three
verses commonly sung capture the
remarkable scenes of the stable and the
shepherd's field and paint a descriptive
portrait of the infant Jesus and his divine
role.

His remarkable life ended rather
early. Bishop Young contracted
pneumonia during a visit to New York
and died suddenly in November of 1885,
at the age of 65.



Information in this article came from:

Hymns of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, (Deseret Book Company, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1985, #204)

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<http://nethymnal.org/html/s/i/siltnit.htm>