

Notes on the History of Silent Night

180 years ago the carol "Stille Nacht! Heilige Nacht" was heard for the first time in a village church in Oberndorf, Austria. The congregation at that Midnight Mass in St. Nicholas Church listened as the voices of the assistant pastor, Fr. Joseph Mohr, and the choir director, Franz Xaver Gruber, rang through the church to the accompaniment of Fr. Mohr's guitar. On each of the six verses, the choir repeated the last two lines in four-part harmony. (The SilentNight.web site continues with an extensive history of the song.)

On Christmas Eve in 1818, in a small village church (St. Nicholas' Church) of Oberndorf in the Austrian Alps, 26-year old assistant pastor, Joseph Mohr, wanted to have a special service to honor his Lord. Thus, he got together with the church organist and teacher, Franz Gruber, to create a special new song for guitar and voices, *Stille Nacht! Heilige Nacht!* It was first printed in 1842. Twelve years later it was performed by a full choir before Emperor Frederick William IV in the Imperial Church in Berlin, establishing it nationally as a classical hymn for all time. A bishop in Florida translated it in 1863, introducing it to North America. It has since been translated into more than seventy languages around the world and has become the most famous carol of all.

182 Years of "Silent Night" 1818-2000

Stille Nacht (Silent Night)

- * Poem: Father Joseph Mohr (1792-1848), written in 1816
- * Music: Franz Xavier Gruber (1787-1863), written in 1818
- * English Translation: John Freeman Young (1820-1885), in 1863
- * The inspiration for the poem came from a trip to bless a newborn in the middle of winter (and snow) for a church member. Until 1995, when an old manuscript from 1816 (in Mohr's writing) was discovered, it was believed that the poem was written in 1818. The original instrumentation available to Gruber was guitar and voices: the organ had broken down.
- * The music was composed in a few hours (on Christmas Eve).
- * In 1841 the King Frederick Wilhelm IV of Prussia heard the song and instructed his musicians to find out who wrote the song. Had he not done this, the origins might be unknown today.

* Arrangement of Silent Night from Joseph Mohr's manuscript (ca. 1820) in the Carolino Augusteum Museum. It is based on the melody and guitar chords he wrote down which is the earliest known version of the song.



In this church, (in Oberndorf, Austria) the Christmas carol "Silent Night! Holy Night!" was heard for the first time on Christmas Eve in 1818. Today, the Silent-Night-Memorial-Chapel stands on the original site of St. Nikolaus Church. Joseph Mohr set the initiative for the creation of the Christmas carol "Silent Night! Holy Night!", when in 1818, before Christmas, he asked Franz X. Gruber to compose a tune for two solo voices, choir and guitar to accompany the lyrics written by him. As Gruber reports in his "Authentic Motive" ("Authentische Veranlassung") in 1854, the "simple composition ... was met with approval on Christmas Eve right away".

The original copy of the carol got lost. The Christmas carol "Silent Night! Holy Night!" set out to conquer the world via Tyrol. To this day it has been translated into about 300 languages and dialects all over the world. A small selection of the versions in various languages can be seen in the sound carrier collection of the museum.

The organ builder Carl Mauracher from Fügen (Zillertal, Tyrol), who repaired the organ in Arnsdorf in 1821 and installed a new organ in the church of St. Nikolaus (Oberndorf) in 1825, brought the composition to Tyrol. During his stay in Oberndorf Mauracher he got to know the Christmas carol - we don't know when exactly - and brought it to his country home. The Strasser family, singers and glove makers from Laimach (Zillertal, Tyrol), took note of the carol and sang it on their annual trips to German markets und fairs - for the first time 1831 or 1832 in Leipzig. Another singer's family from the Zillertal - the Rainer family - brought the song to America. In 1839 they sang the carol in the open air in the burnt-out Trinity Church in New York. At the turn of the century "Silent Night! Holy Night!" could already be proved to have existed in New Zealand, Africa, South and North America. Christian missionaries spread it.