

The Story of “Silent Night”

A Christmas Eve service without music? Not a very happy thought for the young priest Joseph Mohr, who had worked so hard to prepare a beautiful service for his congregation. Standing before him was the church organist, who had just delivered the news that the organ was broken. The upset priest immediately took a walk into the quiet, snow-covered night to gather his thoughts. During this walk, he produced a beautiful poem, inspired by the quiet beauty of his little village of Oberndorf, Austria. He thought about how the peace and quiet might have compared to Bethlehem on the night that Jesus was born.



The following morning, Mohr took his poem to the organist, Franz Gruber, and asked him to write a simple melody that could be accompanied by a guitar. Gruber was very impressed with the poem and was inspired to write the lovely melody that we sing today. They quickly made copies for the church choir to learn in time for the service. In this tiny church, in a remote Austrian village on Christmas Eve of 1818, *Silent Night* was sung for the first time.

*The famous singer Bing Crosby helped make **Silent Night** even more popular when he sang the carol in the movie **The Bells of St. Mary's** (1945).*

Franz Gruber gave most of his small income to help educate the children of his village.

Not long after Christmas, an organ builder—Karl Maurachen—came to repair the organ. When it was fixed, Maurachen asked Gruber to try out the organ to be sure it would play. Gruber played *Silent Night*. Maurachen fell in love with the beautiful carol and wanted to know who had written it. Upon learning that Mohr and Gruber were the authors, he got their permission to copy the piece. As he worked on organs in churches throughout Austria, Maurachen shared the carol with other musicians. *Silent Night* became very popular and was published in 1840. Mohr and Gruber, however, were not credited with writing the carol; instead the piece was listed as “authors unknown.”



Franz Gruber

The King of Prussia heard *Silent Night* sung by the choir at the Imperial Church in Berlin. He was so impressed by the beauty of the carol that he directed his court musicians to find out who had written the piece. While conducting the investigation, the court musicians visited St. Peter’s church in Salzburg, Austria. By an amazing coincidence, Franz Gruber’s son happened to be there, and he told the investigators that his father and Joseph Mohr had written *Silent Night*. After his son informed him of the investigation, Franz Gruber produced an original manuscript to prove that he and Mohr had written the carol, but still the authorship was questioned. Many years later, handwriting experts examined an original score found in a museum in Salzburg, and it was finally confirmed that Joseph Mohr and Franz Gruber were indeed the true authors of *Silent Night*.



John Freeman Young (1820–1885),
a bishop in the Episcopal Church, translated
Silent Night from German to English.

Silent Night has been translated into
nearly 100 languages and dialects.

Silent Night

Words by Joseph Mohr
Music by Franz Gruber

$\text{♩} = 112$

mp Si - lent night, ho - ly night, All is calm,

7 all is bright 'Round yon vir - gin moth - er and Child,

13 Ho - ly In - fant so ten - der and mild, Sleep in heav - en - ly

19 peace, Sleep in heav - en - ly peace. *rit.*