



EVA-MARIA REPOLUSK/SALZBURGERLAND: GATHERING THE CHRISTMAS TREE
SALZBURGERLAND TOURISMUS: SALZBURG MUSEUM, SILENT NIGHT SHEET MUSIC

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Song of Heavenly Peace

An Austrian Christmas carol treasured by millions celebrates a 200th birthday.

By Rich Warren

Weyhnachts Lied. *Melodie von Fr. Xaver*

*... aus dem Himmel, die wir so lieblich heilig haben. Das ist die
... und die wir so lieblich heilig haben. Das ist die
... und die wir so lieblich heilig haben. Das ist die
... und die wir so lieblich heilig haben. Das ist die
... und die wir so lieblich heilig haben. Das ist die*



MICHAEL GROESSINGER FOTOGRAFIE/SALZBURGERLAND TOURISMUS

Slanderous stories will circulate this Christmas season about a poor little church mouse in Oberndorf, Austria.

As the legend goes, the mouse chewed through the organ bellows, putting it out of commission for Christmas Eve services in 1818.

This was very bad timing on the mouse's part because a momentous occasion in musical history was about to take place. The song the world has come to know as *Silent Night* was about to be played and

sung for the first time by the two men who composed its lyrics and melody—Joseph Mohr and Franz Xaver Gruber. Because the organ wasn't working, they were forced to accompany their singing with Mohr's guitar.

Or so the story goes. Except there was no mouse, at least not one that chewed through the bellows. There *was* an organ, and it was working—but poorly, a fact that became important later. Mohr and Gruber had purposely decided to debut their song using a guitar, unaware their musical creation would become one of the most beloved Christmas carols of all time, annually sung by more than 2 billion people in more than 300 languages and dialects. Even two centuries later, few songs are as treasured by so many people.

It's so beloved, in fact, that this year Austria expects a veritable flood of visitors coming to celebrate their favorite carol's 200th birthday, and the country has planned a big welcome.



HALLEIN GRUBERHAUS: HALLEIN MUSEUM, JOSEPH MOHR'S GUITAR



ACHIM MEURER/SALZBURGERLAND TOURISMUS: SALZBURG CHRISTMAS MARKET

The Real Story Over the years, so much folklore has become attached to the simple melody's origins, it's hard to sort out the facts. For decades, many assumed Michael Haydn, Joseph Haydn's brother, was the song's composer. Others, for good reason, thought it was a folksong from the Austrian Tyrol.

Gruber was able to set everyone straight before he died in 1863. In 1818, he'd been a schoolteacher in the village of Arnsdorf but also served as a parish church organist in nearby Oberndorf. On Christmas Eve day, Mohr, the church's assistant priest, handed Gruber a poem he'd composed and asked him to set it to music. Gruber, in a cloudburst of creativity, put together the melody that stirs us to this day. He and Mohr sang it standing beside the church's Nativity scene.

The story might have ended there had the song not been heard the following year by Karl Mauracher, an organ builder who'd been called to work on Oberndorf's defective organ. He was so enchanted with *Stille Nacht*, as it's known in German, he took the song home to Fügen in Tyrol's beautiful Zillertal Valley, nearly 90 miles from Oberndorf.

Two families residing in the valley, the Rainers and Strassers, had sets of singing siblings who were so beguiled by the song, they carried it with them on their European

tours, purportedly even performing it before Austria's emperor and Russia's czar. The Rainers took the song to the U.S., performing it for the first time here in New York in 1839.

Meanwhile, Mohr's and Gruber's careers took them to a number of towns throughout Austria. Today, that means many of the places and relics associated with the song are widely dispersed—or gone altogether. On my *Silent Night* tour last year, I was particularly distressed to learn the church in Oberndorf is now gone, demolished in the early 20th century after repeated flood damage. Mohr's guitar can still be seen in a museum in Hallein, and visitors to where Gruber lived in 1818, an apartment above his schoolhouse in Arnsdorf, will see the desk where he composed *Silent Night's* melody.



RICH WARREN: ARNSDORF MUSEUM, FRANZ XAVER GRUBER'S SILENT NIGHT DESK

2018's Celebrations Tourism officials planned a decentralized celebration for the 200th, identifying 13 *Silent Night* locations countrywide, some of them quite some distance from each other. Visitors may need to pick and choose which ones they most want to see.

Here's what that will mean: Traveling from one site to another, *Silent Night* tourists will have serendipitous encounters with both the countryside's remarkable beauty and with Austrian Christmas traditions. As my touring group drove from Fügen, home of the singing siblings, to Wagrain, where Mohr died in 1848, we passed through astounding vistas of the snow-covered Austrian Alps, even spying the three-tiered Krimmler Waterfalls, one of Europe's highest.

In Salzburg, we passed Mohr's birthplace while meandering through the city's sublime Baroque architecture, all with the magnificent, hilltop Hohensalzburg Fortress hovering high above us. Our tour ended with savoring the smells of roasting chestnuts and mulled wine at the five-centuries-old Christmas market on the square outside the



KRESSER GÖNTER/TIROL WERBUNG

city's cathedral. In our travels, we even saw—from afar—the alpine meadow where Maria spun in circles in the opening of *The Sound of Music*.

Small Places Matter We also learned that even towns with modest connections to *Silent Night* have other reasons to visit. The picture-perfect city of Steyr, 80 miles from Salzburg, is where the carol first appeared in print. There's a replica of that document in the city's Christmas Museum, but there are also 14,000 glittering ornaments and a little train transporting gleeful riders up three floors to an angel's workshop. Plus, the city has a charming puppet theater and dozens of blacksmiths

laboring in the town square—a Steyr Christmas tradition.

On everyone's agenda should be what's replaced the original church in Oberndorf, the beautiful, eight-sided Silent Night Chapel, with a dome and little cupola on top, situated on a knoll out of reach of those troublesome floods. With only a handful of small pews inside, it's as simple as the song itself. The chapel was a highlight of my *Silent Night* tour.

Two men playing guitars led us in singing the song we'd all come to pay homage to. Members of the group came from all over the world, and as we sang, other people, perhaps also from far-off places, entered and joined us in song. I like to think a similar scenario takes place often—one by one, pilgrims from afar enter the chapel and take a seat. Perhaps someone starts to softly hum the carol. As the pews fill, the humming builds, finally blossoming into full-throated song—in English, German, French, Spanish, Mandarin and Russian. Such has been the power of this simple song to stir the souls of listeners in many lands for the past two centuries. **H&A**

Rich Warren is a freelance writer based in Columbus, Ohio.

Planning Your Trip

The website silent-night.com is a veritable encyclopedia, with details of the 13 *Silent Night* locations, events listings, special package offers and much more. Salzburg hosts *Silent Night* walking tours, as well as bus tours to Oberndorf, Arnsdorf and Hallein. Efficient Austrian trains can whisk travelers to points farther away, such as the three *Silent Night* locations in Upper Austria and the Tyrol. For travel-planning assistance, visit your local AAA Travel agent or AAA.com/travel.



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