

Silent Night

Joseph Mohr, Lyrics, 1816; Franz Xaver Gruber, Music, 1818

“Silent Night” was a poem that was written in 1816 by an Austrian priest called Joseph Mohr. On Christmas Eve in 1818 in Oberndorf bei Salzburg, Austria, it is reputed that the organ at St. Nicholas Church had broken. Joseph Mohr gave the poem of *“Silent Night”* (*“Stille Nacht”*) to his friend and Austrian headmaster Franz Xaver Gruber, who composed the melody. The music was therefore intended for a guitar and the simple score was finished in time for Midnight Mass. *“Silent Night”* is the most famous Christmas carol of all time!



In 1859, John Freeman Young (second Bishop, Episcopal Diocese of Florida) published the English translation that is most frequently sung today. The version of the melody that is generally sung today differs slightly (particularly in the final strain) from Gruber's original, which was a sprightly, dance-like tune in 6/8 time, as opposed to the slow, meditative lullaby version generally sung today.

The original manuscript has been lost. However, a manuscript was discovered in 1995 in Mohr's handwriting and dated by researchers at ca. 1820. It shows that Mohr wrote the words in 1816 when he was assigned to a pilgrim church in Mariapfarr, Austria, and shows that the music was composed by Gruber in 1818. 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. The melody of *“Silent Night”* bears resemblance to aspects of Austrian folk music and yodeling.

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