

“Silent Night” as a message of peace

The Christmas song has been reaffirming people’s hope for peace in the world for years

In its hometown of Salzburg, “Silent Night” only became widespread after 1866 as a result of its inclusion in a church songbook. In the rest of Europe and the United States, however, it had already gained popularity thanks to the travelling and singing Rainer and Strasser families from the Zillertal valley. Since its inception, the song has been interpreted as a hopeful message about the human condition. Its status as a world peace song was reaffirmed by its declaration as an intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO in 2011. During the two world wars of the 20th century, the unifying power of the song became especially apparent.

The world peace song: verses filled with hope and solace

“Holy infant, so tender and mild, sleep in heavenly peace”. Joseph Mohr’s Christmas poem begins as a lullaby to the newly born Baby Jesus. The young priest, who is said to have cared deeply for ordinary people, was aware of the anxieties and the suffering his countrymen were experiencing. Hence, he wrote the poem in German, and in such a way that it was easy to understand and move people deeply. The comforting idea of being saved from suffering through the birth of Jesus Christ and by way of God’s love for the peoples of the world continues all the way to the sixth stanza. And with the help of Franz Xaver Gruber’s powerful melody, the song also makes it possible to hope for and believe in a better life here on earth again.

“Silent Night” in the trenches

Christmas 1914: Around five months after the beginning World War I, something occurs on that Western Front — where over a million soldiers had already died or been wounded — that would become known as an unlikely pacifist and fraternal miracle between thousands of soldiers of different nations. On 24 December, Christmas Eve, the trenches fall quiet. Several soldiers place small, illuminated Christmas trees on the upper edge of their trench — as a sign of peace. On both sides of the approximately 50-kilometre-long front in Flanders, the combatants collectively put down their rifles and helmets and sing their domestic Christmas songs. “Silent Night” is also heard — and sung in various mother tongues. The peaceful, solidary Christmas celebration in the middle of the war is treated as a state of emergency. Fraternalisation was subsequently prohibited and made punishable by death.

Leopold Kohr and the Christmas song as a political message

During the Second World War and through the middle of the 1950s, the emigrant from Oberndorf Leopold Kohr (1909 – 1994) fused a message of peace with political statements against the war. In the United States, the economist and philosopher from Salzburg published highly successful calls for empathy for his Austrian homeland with the help of “Silent Night”. Every year during the Christmas season, he wrote dozens of newspaper articles, employing “Silent Night” as a political song against Nazi Germany and calling for the liberation of Austria. With sentimental descriptions of his home of Salzburg and the Austrian Alps, he managed to capture the emotions of his readers: *“Oberndorf is only a small village in Austria. But it is my village, and this is why I often like to think of it. In the distance rise the mighty chains*

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of the Alps to their majestic height. And the melody will float out again from the village which created it to the world to which it belongs.”

“Silent Night” resounds in the garden of the White House in 1941

Leopold Kohr made a leap into the political world with an experience he had during Christmas of 1914, when he witnessed Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill singing “Silent Night” together with crowds of people in the garden of the White House. *“Maybe it was only I who had tears in my eyes. But I thought, sometime, when freedom and peace reign over the world again, and Austria is independent anew, I will tell them at home about the President and the Prime Minister singing Silent Night.”*

Following the end of the war, Kohr moved his political writings aside and placed emotion at the centre of his Christmas messages. Filled with joy, he spoke about the light in children’s eyes and the return of the picturesque landscape of the Austrian Alps he used to call home.

“Silent Night” and “The Sound of Music”

The story of the Trapp family from Salzburg, which had also emigrated to the United States prior to the outbreak of the Second World War and which was perhaps Austria’s most famous band, took a similar turn. In January of 1947, Major General Harry J. Collins approached the Trapp family in the USA. The officer had come to Salzburg with his famous 42nd Rainbow Division and outlined the suffering that the Austrians were experiencing after the War. The Trapp family reacted spontaneously and formed the Trapp Family Austrian Relief Inc. as an official group to support Austria and based it in Stowe, Vermont. Georg von Trapp was registered as the founder and first president, Maria von Trapp as president, Franz Wasner as treasurer. 150 tonnes of relief goods came together once the Trapp family opened their concerts with the following appeal: *“The country, that gave the world Haydn, Mozart, Schubert and Silent Night will perish if we don’t all work together and help.”*

Franz Xaver Gruber peace trail in his birthplace of Hochburg-Ach (Upper Austria)

To this day, “Silent Night” remains as evocative as ever. The Franz Xaver Gruber peace path, which opened in 2012, allows visitors to experience this directly in the form of a hike. Regaining strength, giving one’s life a push and coming into contact with what we share in common with all people across all continents — these are some of the ideas behind the peace path. The circular path can be completed in around 60 minutes and leads into the beautiful landscape of the Innviertel region. It unites nature and art in a unique way. It is lined with seven, around 3-metre-tall sculptures by the Tyrolian sculptor Hubert J. Flörl. The stations, which are dedicated to the five continents, are all equipped with a pair of angel wings and a stanza from “Silent Night”. They invite visitors to think beyond their own horizons by depicting occurrences from other parts of the world during Franz Xaver Gruber’s days. With quotations, poetry and messages of peace, the path invites people to engage with some of life’s profound questions. The final station is the “Joseph Mohr and Franz Xaver Gruber before the Virgin Mother with her child” sculpture in front of the Franz Xaver Gruber Memorial Building. The nativity scene recalls of the creators of the song as well as the Christmas miracle.