

The composer behind the melody of Silent Night: Franz Xaver Gruber

The life and work of the teacher, musician and composer

With the help of an attentive teacher, the creator of the music for “Silent Night” was able to switch careers from linen weaver to teacher and organist. Franz Xaver Gruber (1787 – 1863), originally from the Upper Austrian Innviertel region, taught, played and composed music primarily across SalzburgerLand. He considered his personal high point of his entire career to be his lifetime post as the choirmaster of Hallein. Although Gruber was able to experience the early popularity of his Christmas melody, only his descendants saw it spread across the entire world.

Childhood and school years in Upper Austria

Conrad Xaver Grubber was born on 25 November 1787 into poor circumstances. He grew up in his birthplace at Unterweizberg 9 in the Hochburg municipality in the Innviertel region, along with his parents Josef and Anna, as well as their first four children. Only in 1779, the region became part of “Land ob der Enns”, and thus of Austria, as a result of the War of the Bavarian Succession. The economic situation was dire and small farmers earned an additional income from weaving. Franz Xaver Gruber — who, as was common at the time, took on his godfather’s first name — initially had to learn his father’s craft. However, even as a child, he loved music over everything else. His school teacher Andreas Peterlechner promoted his talent and gave him free music lessons, which his father was vehemently opposed to. After several years of organist practice, Franz received his first own instrument at the age of 11, after demonstrating his extraordinary talents by spontaneously helping out as an organist.

Franz Xaver Gruber’s “talent audition” in 1798

The teacher that was supposed to play the organ on that day had fallen ill and it seemed as if the mass was unlikely to happen. Thus, the young Franz Xaver Gruber was asked whether he would be able to substitute for the teacher, which his father wouldn’t allow. After initially hesitating, he ended up giving in to his son’s wishes, accompanying him to the mass. To the astonishment of everyone, Gruber played the organ as well as his own teacher. Now, even his father was convinced of his talents and gave up on his critical attitude toward music. A crucial event in the boy’s life! A spinet was purchased, which his father personally transported from Burghausen to Hochburg. And from then on, the young Franz was able to live out his musical passions during evenings and during leisure time.

From 1805, he was also able to begin his training as a teacher that he had been longing for. First, the young man perfected his musical abilities with the parish organist Georg Hartdobler in Burghausen, who — on the other side of the Salzach river — lived on Bavarian territory, and thus in a foreign country. These years were overshadowed by the Napoleonic wars — a dangerous time, with the occupiers right at the doorstep. Gruber completed his training as a teacher in Ried in the Innkreis region and took his exams there in 1806.

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Gruber completed the mandated year of work experience as a school assistant to his promoter and teacher Peterlechner in Hochburg.

Teacher, sacristan and organist in Arnsdorf and Oberndorf

In 1807, Gruber began his first independent position as a teacher, sacristan and organist in Arnsdorf. However, not without having to repeat all of his exams once more in Salzburg. In the same year, he married the widow of his predecessor, Maria Elisabeth Engelsberger, who was 13 years older — as a condition requested by the community and quite common at the time. Gruber had two children with her; both died prematurely. In order to improve his financial situation and in the hope to one day receive the teaching position in Oberndorf, he also worked as a choirmaster and organist at the St. Nikola church, located just four kilometres away in Oberndorf.

Musical high points in Arnsdorf

Gruber was considered an excellent teacher, his great passion, however, was music. Beginning in 1817, his love for music connected him with the new assistant priest in Oberndorf, Joseph Mohr, a passionate singer and guitar player. On Christmas in 1818, Gruber added a melody to Mohr's six-stanza poem "Silent Night" for the Christmas Mass in the St. Nikola church. The priest and the teacher sang together, Mohr accompanied the performance with his guitar. After this initial act, Gruber composed an additional organ arrangement for the song. Other than that, however, it didn't seem to hold any particular significance for him. He described it as "a simple composition".

The high point of Gruber's career in Arnsdorf was the 300-year anniversary of the "Maria im Mösl" pilgrimage church in 1820. The festival lasted for five days and counted 20,000 visitors. High-ranking guests, such as abbots from the Michaelbeuern Abbey and St. Peter's Abbey, Salzburg, attended the concerts that Gruber was conducting.

After the death of his first wife in 1825, he married his former pupil Maria Breitfuß. The marriage resulted in ten children; only four of them survived to become adults. Gruber was not transferred to Oberndorf. There were also several disagreements with his superiors. In 1829, he transferred to Berndorf near Salzburg to work as a teacher and sacristan, a municipality which valued good church music.

A life for music in Hallein

Gruber's most ardent wish, to be able to focus on music exclusively, came true in 1835 when he was named choirmaster, singer and organist for the parish church of Hallein. At the time, Hallein was the province's second largest town and counted around 3,500 inhabitants. Filled with enthusiasm, Gruber dedicated himself to training singers and musicians for the church choir. He composed and participated in many musical events, also outside of Hallein. In 1841, Gruber's second wife and his last child died during childbirth. One year later, Gruber married his third wife, his second wife's friend, the shoemaker's widow Katharina Rieser (widowed Wimmer). Gruber's sons stepped into the musical footsteps of their father. The oldest, Franz, founded a choir group in 1847, as well as the Halleiner Liedertafel musical group in 1849, which still exists today. His second son, Felix, followed his father to become the choirmaster of Hallein. Franz Xaver Gruber died of old age in 1863.

After their shared years in Oberndorf, the author and the composer of "Silent Night" never saw each other again. In contrast with Mohr, who already died in 1848, Gruber still got to experience the song's first wave of success in Germany. In 1854, he authored a document to clear up several misconceptions its origins: namely, that the song had not been composed by Michael Haydn and that the Christmas song did not originate from the Zillertal valley in Tyrol but from Oberndorf in SalzburgerLand.