

Stille Nacht: an all-age Christmas performance in song and word

Adapted by Robin Hill from the work of Ian Bradley

Cast: *Narrator 1*
 Narrator 2
 Pianist
 Mary
 Joseph
 Joseph Mohr
 Franz Gruber
 A small choir of four (soprano, alto, tenor, bass, ideally)
 Herr Strasser
 Strasser child 1
 Strasser child 2
 Assorted shepherds
 Assorted animals
 Assorted soldiers

Props: *Table and chair*
 Old-fashioned quill pen (a big feather?)
 Writing paper
 Jesus doll
 Guitar
 A pair of fine leather gloves
 A sheet of music
 One card reading “21%”
 Two cards reading “9%”

The Scene: *An empty stage with a table and chair to one side, and two simple children’s stools to the other.*

Enter Mary (heavily pregnant) and Joseph. "Still the night" is playing on the piano very quietly. It continues under their dialogue.

Mary: Oh Joseph! I'm so tired. Are we nearly there yet?

Joseph: Keep calm and carry on, Mary! Keep calm and carry on.

Mary: But we have travelled so far, and it's getting late.

Joseph: Yes, night is falling, but look! [*Pointing excitedly*] Bethlehem draws near. The city of David!

Mary: At last, Joseph. I'm worn out!

Mary and Joseph wander off while the music continues. Narrators 1 and 2 enter, as the music slowly fades away.

Narrator 1: There are lots of stories about Christmas. And there are lots of stories about the songs we sing at Christmas. This is the story of the most famous Christmas hymn of them all.

Narrator 2: It all starts with a young priest named Father Joseph Mohr, who lived in Oberndorf, Austria. The year was 1818.

Narrators step to one side. Joseph Mohr enters, pen and paper in hand.

Mohr: Christmas is coming, and I really, really want to write a song which will help the congregation to think about the arrival of Jesus into our world – a simple hymn to show people that God has come close to us in the baby born at Bethlehem.

Narrator 1: And so, Joseph Mohr sat down and started writing. [*Mohr sits down at the table and starts writing, as Mary (now carrying her Jesus doll) and Joseph enter and sit on the stools.*] He wrote and wrote and wrote. He wrote about Mary and Joseph and that tiny baby boy, born in a stable bare. This was Jesus: the one sent by God into a dark and troubled world; the one who was the most special of all Christmas gifts; the one who would show in his living and in his dying that God really had arrived in human form that very first Christmas night. Here was the Son of God, born for all the world.

Narrator 2: Before long, that young priest had come up with a Christmas hymn. *[Mohr shows off his writing.]* He took it to his friend, Franz Gruber: a local school teacher who also played the organ in church. Perhaps Franz could come up with a tune to fit the words of his hymn.

Mohr stands up to meet Gruber as he enters with a guitar, looking at Mohr's text.

Gruber: Ah Joseph, your Christmas hymn is very fine indeed! Let me work on it for a while and see if I might come up with a soft and gentle tune which will go with this story of the child born in a manger.

Gruber sits down with Mohr standing behind. Gruber mulls over the words (miming guitar) under the narration.

Narrator 1: Franz got to work on the tune, finishing it in time for midnight mass on Christmas Eve 1818. The two men would make the first ever performance of the song after the service had finished at St Nicholas's Church, Oberndorf.

MUSIC: Choir sings simple German "Stille Nacht", as children form tableau of manger scene on stage (Mary, Joseph, baby Jesus, shepherds with assorted animals).

Gruber: *[Shaking hands with Mohr]* My dear Joseph, you have done a wonderful thing in writing your lovely song, and I am pleased to help in bringing it to the ears of our congregation.

Mohr: Who knows, perhaps we will sing it again in future years.

Gruber: And maybe we will too, Joseph. Maybe we will. Gute Nacht, und fröhliche Weihnachten!

Mohr: Fröhliche Weihnachten, Franz! Merry Christmas to you!

MUSIC: Play instrumental verse on piano as all characters exit, under narration:

Narrator 2: And that might have been that. Yet another Christmas hymn written, performed and soon forgotten. But in this case, the sheet music of the little hymn made its way to a certain glove-maker: a

man named Herr Strasser, who was fond of folk music. He also loved to perform with his family singing group, which toured around nearby villages putting on shows for their friends.

Enter Strasser, fine gloves in one hand, a creased manuscript in the other, with two children.

Strasser: Children, children, look! I have found a lovely new Tyrolean folk carol. It's called "*Stille Nacht*", and I'm sure you could sing it just beautifully!

Child 1: Oh Dad! You're always making us sing!

Strasser: Yes, but this song, you are going to like! It tells of Jesus' birth in a manger one cold and dark night as all the world lay silent. It tells of the holy infant sleeping peacefully. It tells of shepherds and angels ... and love. Yes! It speaks of God's love smiling from the face of the Christ child. And the tune's great too.

Child 2: This song, we are going to like!

[All look at manuscript, then leave the stage, under narration.]

Narrator 1: The long, long journey of *Stille Nacht* had begun. The Strasser family performed the song each Christmas and people loved it as soon as they heard it. Then, in 1832, the hymn was published in a set of four Tyrolean songs. Franz went on to arrange his tune for organ, orchestra and choir, and soon, it was being sung all across Europe.

Narrator 2: It took a further quarter of a century before the hymn was translated into English and performed in Britain for the first time, by the choir of St Mark's Church, Brighton. Then, lots of other translations followed, so that people all around the world could sing of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem through the words of Joseph Mohr and the music of Franz Gruber.

MUSIC: Play verse on piano, as soldiers enter, forming two camps.

Narrator 1: Exactly a century ago in 1914, almost 100 years after its first appearance in Austria, *Stille Nacht* proved as good as its name. With the Great War raging, that first Christmas of fighting was

interrupted when a gentle hymn found itself sung first by German troops, who were soon joined by soldiers from the other side of no-man's-land. For one brief moment, silence reigned as the young men of two opposing armies worshipped God, singing together about the birth of the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ.

One soldier from each camp slowly and cautiously moves centre stage, and shakes hands with the other, then the tableau re-forms once more, surrounded by all performers.

Narrator 2: In our own time, *Stille Nacht* has become a much-loved favourite, often voted number 1 in surveys around this time of year. In 1996, 21% of people asked named it as their favourite Christmas hymn. *[One child holds up a "21%" card, looking happy.]* In joint second place came "Away in a manger" and "O come, all ye faithful", each with only 9% of the vote. *[Two children hold up "9%" cards, looking sad.]* Clearly, people know what they like the best, and it's not hard to see why. *[Cards are lowered.]*

Narrator 1: Simple enough for the youngest child to sing, but loved by young and old alike, *Stille Nacht* tells the story of Jesus' birth in a quiet yet powerful way, its child-like words perfectly matched by the grace of its tune.

Narrator 2: And so let us all join together, in singing to God's glory an English translation of what may very well be the world's favourite Christmas hymn: *Still the night, holy the night.*

All sing, then exit.

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If you use the script, have fun, and let me know how it goes!

With best wishes, especially for Christmas when it comes,

Robin

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