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## The Church Tech Fail that Inspired "Silent Night"

The song would not be known today if it weren't for an 1800's-era epic technical failure. God answered the prayer of this struggling church tech with a song that has inspired souls for centuries.





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## *Organ pipes*

The classic Christmas carol “Silent Night” is one of the most popular songs of the season, but, you may not know, that the song may never have been sung, had it not been for a technical failure.

“Silent night, holy night,

All is calm, all is bright

Round yon virgin mother and child.

Holy infant, so tender and mild...”

Those words, no doubt, will be sung by thousands of congregations at some point during this Christmas season. “Silent Night” has been translated into more than 160 different languages, so it's safe to say that it will be sung by hundreds of thousands of voices all over the world. Time Magazine declared it the most popular Christmas song ever, based on the number of times that it has been commercially recorded. In 2011, UNESCO declared the song to be an “intangible cultural heritage” in Austria. It is the very definition of a classic, but the epic song would not be known if it weren't for an epic technical failure.

The winter of 1818 had just begun and it was already bitter cold in the Austrian village of Obendorf, located a few miles north of Salzburg. It was December 24th,

and inside the town's small chapel the young assistant priest, Joseph Mohr, was working on the church's biggest piece of technology. In those days a pipe organ was the highest piece of tech in churches. Like a sound system today, it was unheard of for a church not to have one. Even small chapels like St. Nicholas's had one. (St. Nicholas is called the "Silent Night Chapel" today.)

Like many of us, Mohr, who was also the church's musical director, tried everything he knew for hours to get this tech up and running. Normally he had no problem working out these issues. Perhaps it was the cold or a mechanical problem, but one thing was clear, there was no chance that a repairman could be brought in before Christmas Eve services that night.

Also, like many of us, Joseph went back to his desk for a little reflection and prayer. He had spent weeks planning the special service and he was frustrated. God answered his pray with a moment of inspiration.

Mohr remembered a poem that he had written two Christmases prior, when he was assigned to a church in Mariafar, Austria. He had been walking in the woods in mountainous region at night and thought of the phrase "Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht," or "Silent Night, Holy Night." The words came to him as he was reflecting on that night when Mary gave birth to her first born. He composed a six-stanza poem from the line.

Mohr rummaged through his things and found a copy of the poem. He raced over to the house of Franz Gruber, the church's organist. Gruber was a gifted musician, having once studied under master organist Georg Hardobler. Mohr explained the crisis. He asked if there was any way that he could put music to the poem, and be ready for that night's service. Gruber agreed and the men decided that the song could be played on a guitar for this occasion. At that time in Europe, a guitar was considered a humble instrument and not suited for church music.

Within hours the pair met at the chapel and rehearsed their new collaboration. At midnight mass, before the familiar faces of their congregation, Franz Gruber played his simple melody, and Joseph Mohr sang the words of his poem that would make musical history. Neither would have any idea how significant this moment was.

But wait! That is not the end of the story. You see, Gruber and Mohr could not load their song to YouTube and make it popular like today. “Silent Night” may never have reached beyond that tiny Austrian church, had it not been for one more technology expert, Karl Mauracher.

Mauracher was the 1800's version of the IT specialist. Instead of Information Technology, he was an expert in MT, Music Technology. Karl was organ builder and repairman who lived more than 100 miles away in the Ziller valley. He travelled all over the region installing and maintaining pipe organs in dozen's of houses of worship. He made the trip to Obendorf a few weeks later and was able to fix the organ.

While Mauracher was there, Mohr was pleased to share the story of the new Christmas arrangement of the song he began writing a few years prior. He even performed the tune for the repairman. Mauracher loved the song! Before heading home, he asked the young priest for copies of the song to take with him. Mauracher proceeded to introduce “Stille Nacht” to churches all over the region. Within a decade or so, the song became a German classic.

A few years later the song hit American soil along with German-speaking immigrants. The version we know today, was translated into English in 1859 by John Freeman Young, a Episcopal priest in New York. He published a song, that included three of the original six stanzas, in English that year. Young also slowed the tune a bit from Gruber's original. The next 150 years would see the song's

popularity explode.

When we hear this song today, we should be reminded of the birth of Jesus in his humble circumstances. But let it also remind us of the humble young priest and his poem. He never made any money from the song, but the impact has been tremendous.

Perhaps Mohr's story could be summed up by James' phrase: "The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working." (James 5:16b) God answered the prayer of this church tech with a song that has inspired souls for centuries.

"Sleep in heavenly peace..."

BY JEFF CHAVES

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