

Playstage

Junior

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## ALL IS CALM, ALL IS BRIGHT



The story behind the famous Christmas carol, 'Silent Night'.



Written by  
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## ALL IS CALM, ALL IS BRIGHT – THE STORY OF ‘SILENT NIGHT’

### Background to the Play and the Carol

*These notes could appear in the programme or could be given by an announcer (in abbreviated form) before the play starts.*

*Silent Night* (German: *Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht*) was first performed on Christmas Eve 1818 at St Nicholas Parish Church in the small Austrian town of Oberndorf bei Salzburg. *The Play of Silent Night* tells the story behind the carol's composition. A young priest, FATHER JOSEPH MOHR, had come to Oberndorf the year before. He had already written the lyrics of *Stille Nacht* and after river flooding damaged the organ of the church in Oberndorf he brought the words to FRANZ GRUBER, schoolmaster and organist in the nearby village of Arnsdorf, and asked him to compose a melody and guitar accompaniment so that the song could be sung at Mass on Christmas Eve. The church was eventually destroyed by repeated flooding and replaced with the Silent-Night-Chapel, which stands on the site today – while *Silent Night* became one of the most popular Christmas carols ever composed, and in 2011 was declared an “item of intangible cultural heritage” by UNESCO.

ALL IS CALM, ALL IS BRIGHT – THE STORY OF ‘SILENT NIGHT’

CAST

HANS, as an old man and as a boy: played by the same performer

ANNA, as an old woman and as a girl: played by the same performer

FRAU OBER, innkeeper’s wife and local busybody, and mother of ANNA

VILLAGE CHILDREN, a flexible number of either gender (*needed for more than one scene*)

FATHER JOSEPH MOHR, a parish priest in Oberndorf

FRANZ GRUBER, a schoolmaster in the village of Arnsdorf (*needs to be able to play the guitar (or mime to a recording)*)

*Running time approximately 15 minutes*

*8 speaking parts, unlimited number of village children.*

Setting

Time: 1818 and 1890

Place: Salzburg, Austria, and the nearby villages of Oberndorf and Arnsdorf

## ALL IS CALM, ALL IS BRIGHT – THE STORY OF ‘SILENT NIGHT’

*The stage is bare. Faintly – in the distance – “Silent Night” is being sung, as if by carol singers.*

*Onto the stage comes HANS, as an old man, wrapped up against the cold and walking with a stick, his other hand weighed down with wrapped parcels of gifts. He addresses the audience as “Silent Night” fades away.*

HANS *(as an old man)*

Silent Night. Well, there’s no silence here in Salzburg, on this busy Christmas Eve! The bells of the churches. The excited squeals of children tumbling in the snow. The push of crowds in the markets as people haggle over the price of a goose to roast over the fire for tonight’s great feast. And the carol singers. Of course, the carol singers. *(He places the gifts at his feet)* Don’t get me wrong – I love Christmas. Always have done, since I was a boy. *(He jabs his stick at the gifts)* These are for my grandchildren. Another one arrives each year! Every Christmas I have to remind myself how many I have! And how many presents I have to buy! Children are spoilt these days. I never saw gifts the likes of these when I was growing up, not far from here in a small village called Oberndorf.

FRAU OBER

*(Offstage; calling)* Hans! Hans, is that you?

HANS *(as an old man)*

Christmas then was a round of singing and feasting and then more singing, and when our voices were hoarse, we would toast chestnuts in front of the roaring hearth as the snow fell in soft swirls outside the front door. And the highlight was Mass, in St Nicholas’ Church. Oh, the magic of that service! I could feel it tingling to the very ends of my fingers! But one time, in 1818, when I was eleven years old, it looked as if there would be no Christmas magic that year.

FRAU OBER

*(Off)* Hans! Where are you? We need all the extra hands we can get!

HANS

*(Removing his coat and calling back to FRAU OBER)* I'm here, Frau Ober! *(To the audience)* It's not difficult for any of us to become a child again. Childhood is something that lives inside each and every one of us, all our lives – like a heartbeat.

*(His coat now off, he reveals that he is dressed as a young boy in winter clothes from the early nineteenth century.)* I won't need this anymore. *(He casts aside his stick – and picks up the parcelled gifts with the glee of a child receiving them at Christmas)* And these – these are all for me, I presume!

FRAU OBER

*(Off; more insistent now)* HANS! I hope you've not got your eye on those presents! They're not for opening until after the service on Christmas Eve!

HANS

*(Hurriedly placing the presents to one side)* Shh! *(He winks conspiratorially to the audience and puts his finger to his lips)* Not a word to Frau Ober. She's the Oberndorf busybody. She makes the village her business. And right now, she's in heaven! A storm has come to Oberndorf, roaring and wailing around our clutch of wooden houses like an ogre let loose from the mountains....

*(Sound effects: A whirling storm, outside)*

*(FRAU OBER enters. She is a fearsome woman, all skirts and bonnets, and carries some buckets.)*

FRAU OBER

...and the water from the river is hard up against the church doors. But we won't let it in! We won't! The Lord will watch over our village today! And He's expecting every one of us to do our bit! *(She dumps the buckets in front of HANS)* As if that's

not enough, great dirty torrents of water are pouring from the church ceiling. Now make yourself useful for a change, Hans! Get yourself to St Nicholas' and get to it!

*(HANS picks up the buckets and looks at her quizzically.)*

HANS

Get to what, exactly, Frau Ober?

FRAU OBER

*(Already going)* My daughter's there.

HANS

*(Missing a beat)* Anna?

FRAU OBER

She'll show you what to do. Now... *(thinking aloud)* The bridge over the river! The men of the village must shore it up! I must gather them in the square!

*(She leaves with a flourish – and HANS once more addresses the audience.)*

HANS *(to the audience)*

Anna! It's lucky Frau Ober has bustled off. Whenever I hear Anna's name I turn the same colour red as the warm wine they serve from a barrel after we've all come back through the snow from Mass on Christmas Eve! And two weeks ago, I went redder still, when our master Herr Gruber made me sit next to her in class! I'd been in a race with two other boys. We had shinned up the drainpipes to see who could reach the roof of the schoolroom quicker! I won! But Herr Gruber caught us. Our punishment was to sit with the girls. Some punishment! He made me sit next to Anna... *(Sotto voce. He has seen ANNA approaching, and confides even more with the audience)*....the girl that every boy in the school wants to sit next to.

*(ANNA enters from the opposite direction to the one her mother left from. Accompanying her are several children. Three have been envisioned here – a number that could be easily increased, with a redistribution of lines.)*

ANNA

Hans! You've brought the buckets!

HANS

Your mother told me to!

ANNA

There's not a moment to lose!

CHILD 1

*(Looking up – as if at the ceiling)* There's a waterfall coming through the roof!

ANNA

*(Distributing the buckets)* Here! Each of your take one!

*(The CHILDREN, including HANS and ANNA, place buckets around the stage – as if they are catching water pouring from the ceiling. Watching them from the side is a priest, FATHER MOHR. They are so busy they don't see him until he speaks.)*

FATHER MOHR

Children!

CHILD 2

Father Mohr!

FATHER MOHR

No, don't stop – you are doing a fine job!

CHILD 3

Will we be able to save the church, Father?

FATHER MOHR

Well, I hope so...

HANS

*(Lifting up his feet, as if they are wet)* The floor is soaked! There's water everywhere!

*(The others do the same: we have to imagine an inch of water, covering the floor.)*

FATHER MOHR

*(Despairing)* It's coming from underneath the door!

HANS

The river! Like Frau Ober said! It's burst its banks!

CHILD 3

What can we do?

FATHER MOHR

We need something to sweep the water away.

ANNA

Brooms! There are some under the stairs to the tower!

FATHER MOHR

Yes – Anna's right! Each one of you children fetch a broom! There's still a chance we can save the church!

*(ANNA and the CHILDREN head off in search of brooms. Meanwhile HANS has drifted over to the organ: it takes the form of a console, with a wooden bellows pump to one side – used for pumping air into it.)*

HANS

We might be able to save the church. But I don't think we can save the organ. *(He plonks his bucket on it, as if to catch a cascade of water pouring from the ceiling)* Look at all that water! *(He presses his hand against the organ)* It's wet through! The wood is all rotten!



FATHER MOHR

The organ? Oh, please God that the organ is not damaged. Not with our Christmas Eve Mass so close! Hans! Pump the bellows and see if it sounds!

*(HANS begins pumping the bellows. FATHER MOHR plays a couple of chords on the keyboard – but no sound is made. SEE PRODUCTION NOTES)*

FATHER MOHR

Nothing. Not even a wheeze! Pump harder, Hans! Maybe you can pump out some of the water that's drained into the pipes!

*(ANNA and the children appear with brooms. ANNA starts getting them to sweep the floor of water as HANS continues pumping the bellows.)*

HANS

It's no good!

FATHER MOHR

Go on, Hans! Any moment now – there will be a whoosh of water, and it will sound again!

HANS

It's no good, I tell you! The pump handle is heavy. As if I'm pumping water instead of air!

FATHER MOHR

Stop then, Hans – there's no need to exhaust yourself.

*(ANNA has momentarily stopped sweeping and is watching HANS and FATHER MOHR.)*

ANNA

Can it be repaired?

FATHER MOHR

There may be some hope. But, in the meantime, let's try and save the church! All hands to it, children!

*(FATHER MOHR and the CHILDREN sweep out the floor of the church as HANS and ANNA take up the narration to the audience.)*

HANS

We swept for half the night, until the rain had ceased, and water no longer poured through the ceiling.

ANNA

Outside the church the river rose to the top of the bridge and poured in through the doors of the church too.

FATHER MOHR

*(By the organ)* Hans! Anna! Let's have one last go at the organ! There's just a chance it's dried out!