

Conrad Franz Xaver Gruber

Stille nacht! Heil'ge Nacht!

For 14-piece brass ensemble and timpani after Gruber's 1818 setting for vocals, horns, strings, and organ
Edited by Klaus Smedegaard Bjerre (2013)

This beautiful carol is sung worldwide in locally adapted versions. Also here in Denmark, but as it is of Austrian origins, I hadn't considered issuing it within the YM project, as I concentrate on Danish hymns and carols with the occasional request for other nationalities. That was until the FaceBook group of Horn People made me aware of Gruber's manuscript for his 1818 setting in D major for soprano and alto soloists, 4-part mixed choir, 2 natural horns in D, 2 violins, cello, and organ. Harmonically it is very simple, and the bass line is even simpler, as all notes belong to the triad on the tonic. However it beautifully represents the tradition of singing and instrumental playing known from northern Austria and southern Bavaria. The intonation there is so unbelievably pure as if equal temperament were never invented.

Gruber's horn calls caught my interest because I could hear them expanded from one to four horns, and I could hear potential in a setting for the 14-piece brass format that I have written settings for since the fall of 2012.

Gruber's setting is 17 bars long, which formally is 12 bars of the melody sung by the soloists, the 4 last bars repeated by the choir, and then 2 bars of instrumental epilogue, where the two latter elements are compressed into the frame of 5 bars. There is no introduction and there are no indications of variations between the repeats.

A presentation of just the original 17 bar form, would be a bit short. Plain repeats of 3 instrumental verses would be on the dull side. My solution has the 1st and 3rd verses played by two trumpet soloists. Two solo trombones play the 2nd verse with the slight variations to the melody found in Mohr's 1820 setting for 2 vocalists and guitar. Mohr was pastor of Gruber's church and also was the author of the original verses. Where Gruber's two solo voices spread out into sixths, I have added an inner voice, so that the 3rd trombone joins in as a soloist.

The instrumental epilogue for the 1st verse is very close to Gruber's original. The epilogue for the 2nd verse is strongly inspired by Mohr's guitar epilogue. The last epilogue again is close to Gruber's original only the dynamics have been radically changed to fit the title of this very carol. And then I have written two bars of introduction with motives from Gruber's setting.

This carol often is sung in a very static fashion. My interpretation rather is about this being a sample of the slow 6/8-dance known as the Siciliano. I included a timpani part (not found in the original) with the purpose of creating rhythmic clarity rather than making noise. Sticks should be fairly hard. Please do not underestimate the rhythmic complexity of this edition. Especially the horns and the timpani should be very well coordinated.

The key of C major was chosen because it is kinder on the brasses than D major. It may even be quite close to the pitch of the original performance. Trumpet parts come in C and Bb, horn parts in F and C basso, tenor trombone parts in tenor and bass clefs, and the euphonium comes in bass clef concert plus treble clef Bb.

Korsør - December 2nd - 2013

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