

Legacy of Melody - - - enduring Christmas carol surpasses all others

Special to The Liberal
By Mary Mastin

Of the multitude of lovely Christmas carols, there is one enduring favorite which surpasses all others.

For a century and a half, the glorious melody and poetic lines of Silent Night, Holy Night, have continued to move mankind to a deeper understanding of the joyful Christmas message.

This best known and most beloved of all the Christmas hymns was conceived in a small Austrian village in the year 1818.

A parish priest, Joseph Mohr, and a schoolmaster and organist, Franz Gruber, combined their literary and musical talents to produce a masterpiece of compelling harmony.

The musician responsible for the haunting strains of Silent Night, Holy Night, was Franz Xaver Gruber. Born in Unterweitzburg, Upper Austria, he was the third son of a weaver, who insisted the young Franz follow in his father's footsteps.

Fortunately, Gruber's mother recognized her son's musical abilities and encouraged him to develop his talents. Secretly, he received instruction from the local schoolmaster and organist, who taught him the elements of composition and the technique of the organ.

When Franz Gruber was 12 years of age, fate presented him with an opportunity that was to change the entire course of his life.

Owing to the illness of Gruber's teacher, there was no one to play the parish organ for the celebration of mass.

The problem was solved by young Franz, whose capabilities astonished everyone, including his father.

Finally Franz Gruber's parents were agreed their son should be something more than a weaver.

After securing his teaching degree, Gruber's first post as schoolmaster and organist was obtained at the age of 28, in the Austrian village of Oberndorf. Later he was to go to Hallein, where he founded the now famous Hallein Choral Society, and directed its activities until his death in June, 1863.

The other member of this unique team was the parish priest, Joseph Mohr, who was born in Salzburg, 1792. He also was gifted musically, but in addition, possessed literary talents.

Although his early life was one of hardship and poverty, his musical ability was so conspicuous he gained the attention and assistance of the music director at the cathedral in Salzburg.

As a result, Mohr became a choir boy, and because of his ability to learn rapidly, a soloist, and then a violinist. He next mastered the organ, and due to his unusual capabilities, earned free admittance to the monastery school.

It was from here he entered the priesthood and eventually assumed the curacy of St. Nicholas Church in Oberndorf.

During the year 1818, Joseph Mohr and Franz Gruber met for the first time at Oberndorf. An immediate friendship

sprang up between the two men whose destinies were now linked through the common bonds of music, piety, and devotion to their work.

Just prior to Christmas of

the same year, Mohr's parish organ collapsed due to the bellows having been riddled by mice. There was not enough time for the organ master to make the necessary repairs; and this

was the crisis which propelled these two congenial friends towards fame and immortality.

On December 24, 1818, Joseph Mohr brought the words of Silent Night, Holy Night, to Franz Gruber and

requested his poem be set to simple music suitable for two solo voices, choir, and guitar.

The composition was to be completed for that same Christmas Eve. It was intended as a substitute for

the disabled organ, and was to be produced only once.

Within a few hours, Gruber matched the magical lyrics to a score which possessed the timeless quality of artistry. On that Christmas Eve,

over 150 years ago, the glorious melody of Silent Night, Holy Night, filled the small parish church at Oberndorf.

The composer and librettist, supported by the choir and guitar, sang the

solo parts. The lovely carol, which was to be only an improvisation, moved the congregation to tears.

They were enthralled by the magnificence of the music, and it was inevitable that such beauty should

echo down through the ages.

So it happened that two men of deep faith and humble origin gave to the world, a Christmas gift which is still unequalled in the strength of its universal appeal.

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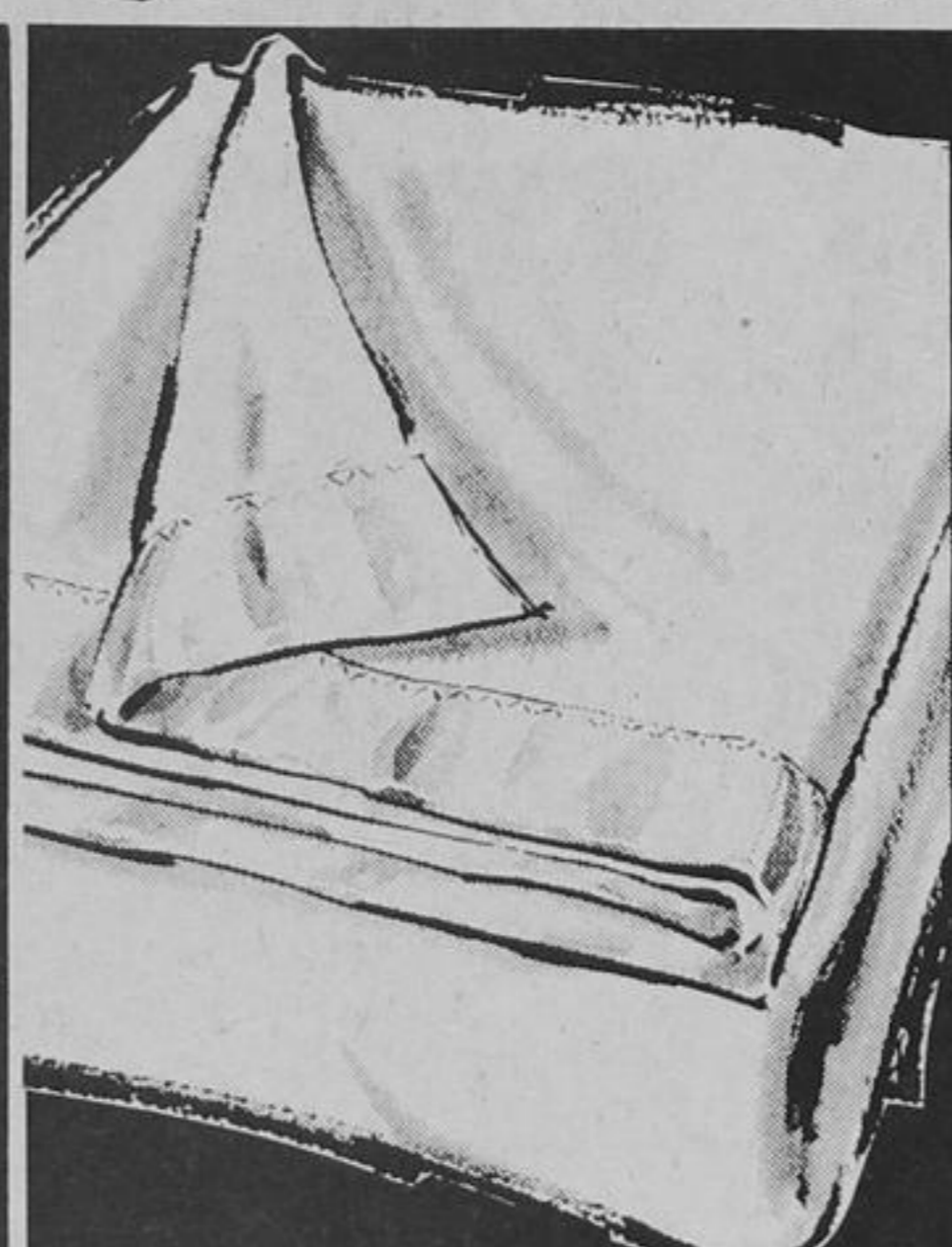


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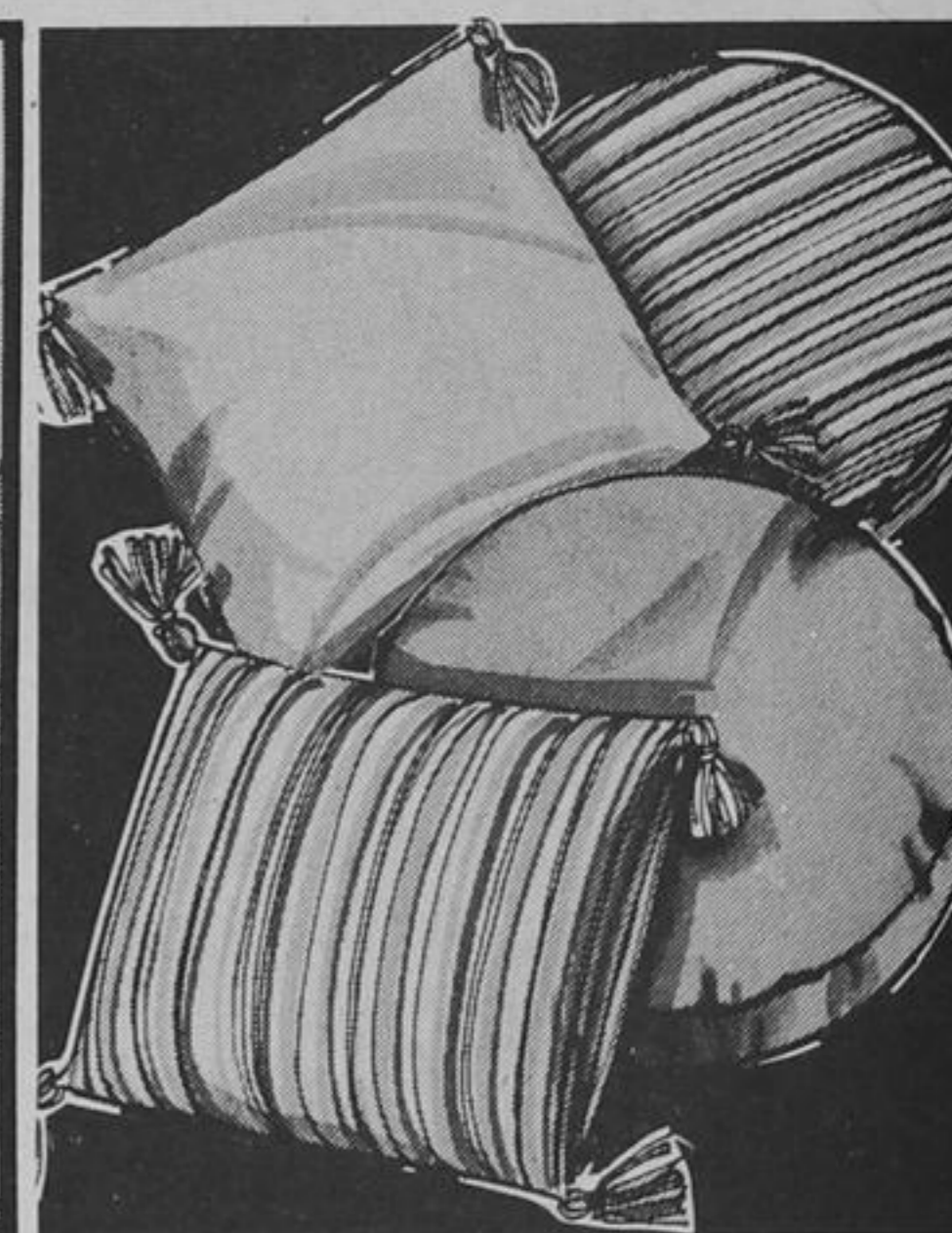
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