

# Die Gedanken Sind Frei

(My Thoughts Are Free)

*Protest Song from the German Peasant Wars,  
with new English lyrics*

SATB, piano



---

## Elizabeth Alexander

---

## Die Gedanken Sind Frei

Most people are familiar with the game-changing French Revolution of 1789, but far fewer have heard of the German Peasant Wars of 1524-25. This is probably because they weren't successful! However, these early political and economic battles set the stage for what happened two centuries later. These rebellions also created a fertile environment for the ideas of Martin Luther and other Protestant reformers, who claimed that any person might interpret scripture for himself, rather than simply believing what the priests said — a notion referred to as “the priesthood of all believers.”

**Die Gedanken Sind Frei** (“My Thoughts Are Free”) predates the German Peasant Wars by hundreds of years, but it quickly became their primary rallying cry and protest song. Centuries later, this song was made popular again by Pete Seeger, who sang an English translation by Arthur Kevass.

**Composer Note:** I initially sought permission to use Kevass' lyrics, but I wasn't able to reach an agreement with the copyright owner. I'm a little embarrassed to admit that I sulked about this rejection for nearly five years before realizing that I might create my *own* English translation, using the original German lyrics as a starting point. (After all, *Die Gedanken sind frei!*)

It soon became clear to me that this enduring protest song was written in an era which lacked not only freedom of speech, assembly and religion, but also due process and legal representation. 16<sup>th</sup> century peasants reveled in the right to “think what I wish, *but always discreetly*,” and to “laugh and joke and think *in my heart*,” because at that time, to disagree with political and religious powers was to invite not only ridicule, but also imprisonment or death. Thus, a literal translation of the original opening line reads: “Die Gedanken sind frei; *nobody can guess them*.”

Desiring to capture the song's spirit in a compelling way, I realized that the challenge of our *own* time is to take this courageous stance one step further. We are now offered the possibility of effecting change through the *open vocalization* of our thoughts — a possibility that was (literally) “unthinkable” for a 16<sup>th</sup> century German farmer. Thus, my lyrics challenge us to not only think free thoughts but also — in the words of my opening line: “proudly profess them.”

**A Final Note:** With the exception of this more overt tone, my lyric contains a reasonably respectable singing translation of the first three verses of the original German lyric. But from that point on, the creativity of this 20th century lyricist could no longer be held in captivity. Thus, in the final two verses, the intellectual rigor of the translation was somewhat compromised, if not altogether abandoned. - E.A.



English translation & additional lyrics  
© 2010 by Elizabeth Alexander

The little guy on the cover is a 15<sup>th</sup> century peasant, reprinted from the French manuscript, *La Danse Macabre*

Die Gedanken sind frei,  
I proudly profess them.  
As hard as you try,  
you cannot suppress them.  
No fence can confine them,  
No creed undermine them,  
They ring from on high:  
Die Gedanken sind frei!

They laugh like a child,  
and sing and make merry,  
They bloom ever wild  
like flow'rs on a prairie,  
They wind and they wander,  
They pensively ponder,  
They soar to the sky.  
Die Gedanken sind frei!

If you try to bind  
my thoughts in a prison,  
The next day you'll find  
that they have arisen!  
A brainstorm will thunder,  
And burst chains asunder,  
And off they will fly:  
Die Gedanken sind frei!

They're liable to change  
as I become older,  
So don't think it strange  
if they become bolder!  
They won't remain static  
Packed up in some attic;  
To that, I'll say: “Fie!”  
Die Gedanken sind frei.

Tho' you may despise them,  
I shall not disguise them,  
You can't codify them,  
and I won't deny them,  
Go on and deride them;  
I'm not going to hide them,  
Assail me or jail me,  
my thoughts shall not fail me,  
It's useless to ban them,  
or pan them, or can them,  
So don't even try!  
Die Gedanken sind frei!

# Die Gedanken Sind Frei

(My thoughts are free)

16th century German protest song

English lyrics\* and arrangement by Elizabeth Alexander

*(♩ = 63-66)*

Piano

7 *mp*

S Die Ge - dan - ken sind frei, I proud - ly pro -

A *mp* Die Ge - dan - ken sind frei, I proud - ly pro -

T *mp* Die Ge - dan - ken sind frei, I proud - ly pro -

B *mp* Die Ge - dan - ken sind frei, I proud - ly pro -

*Ped. \** *Ped. \** *Ped. \**

12

S - fess them. As hard as you try, you can - not sup - press them. No

A - fess them. As hard as you try, you can - not sup - press them. No

T - fess them. As hard as you try, you can - not sup - press them. No

B - fess them. As hard as you try, you can - not sup - press them. No

*Ped. \** *Ped. \** *Ped. \** *Ped. \** *Ped. \**

17

S  
fence can con - fine them, No creed un - der - mine them, They

A  
fence can con - fine them, No creed un - der - mine them, They

T  
fence can con - fine them, No creed un - der - mine them, They

B  
fence can con - fine them, No creed un - der - mine them, They

Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. \*

21

S  
ring from\_ on\_ high: Die Ge - dan - ken sind frei, they *mf*

A  
ring from\_ on\_ high: Die Ge - dan - ken sind frei, they *mf*

T  
ring from\_ on\_ high: Die Ge - dan - ken sind frei, they *mf*

B  
ring from\_ on\_ high: Die Ge - dan - ken sind frei, they *mf*

Ped. Ped. \* Ped. \*

25

S ring from on high: Die Ge - dan - ken sind frei!

A ring from on high: Die Ge - dan - ken sind frei!

T ring from on high: Die Ge - dan - ken sind frei!

B ring from on high: Die Ge - dank - en sind frei!

*mf*

*ped.* \*

30

T *mp* They

B *mp* They

*mp* *p* *r.h.* *l.h.*

36 **A**

S *mp* They

A *mp* They

T *mf* laugh like a child, and sing and make mer - ry.

B *mf* laugh like a child, and sing and make mer - ry.



54

*mf*

S  
soar to the sky, they soar to the sky,

A  
soar to the sky, they soar to the sky,

T  
soar to the sky, they soar to the sky,

B  
soar to the sky, they soar to the sky,

*mf*

*mf*

\* Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. \*

59

S  
die Ge - dan - ken sind frei.

A  
die Ge - dan - ken sind frei.

T  
die Ge - dan - ken sind frei.

B  
die Ge - dan - ken sind frei.

*p*

Ped. \*

64

Ped. \*

70

S *mf*  
If

A *mf*  
If

T *mf*  
If

B *mf*  
If

*mf*

**B**

75

S you try to bind my thoughts in a pri - son, the next day you'll find that

A you try to bind my thoughts in a pri - son, the next day you'll find that

T you try to bind my thoughts in a pri - son, the next day you'll find that

B you try to bind my thoughts in a pri - son, the next day you'll find that

Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped.



rallentando

81

S they have a - ris - en. A brain - storm will thun - der and burst chains a -

A they have a - ris - en. A brain - storm will thun - der and burst chains a -

T they have a - ris - en. A brain - storm will thun - der and burst chains a -

B they have a - ris - en. A brain - storm will thun - der and burst chains a -

*f*

*f*

*f*

*f*

**rallentando**

Ped. Ped. Ped. *f* Ped. Ped. Ped.

86

S - sun - der,\* And off they will

A - sun - der,\* And off they will

T - sun - der,\*

B - sun - der,\*

**a tempo** *mp innocently*

*port.*

*mp innocently*

*port.*

**a tempo** *mp innocently*

Ped. \* Ped. \*

\* This chord works just fine without the divisi, with the upper notes omitted. But if you're raring to go, then by all means, go for it!



**C** freely, with a dramatic flair

B or A Solo

105

lia - ble to change as I be - come old - er, so

*colla voce*

Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped.

B or A Solo

109

don't think it strange if they be - come bold - er! (r!)

Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. \*

S  
A  
T  
B

114 **a tempo** *mf*

*mf* They won't re - main stat - ic, packed

*mf* They won't re - main stat - ic, packed

*mf* They won't re - main stat - ic, packed

*mf* They won't re - main stat - ic, packed

**a tempo** *mf*

Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped.

118

S up in some at - tic — To that, I'll say: "Fie!" *f*

A up in some at - tic — To that, I'll say: "Fie!" *f*

T up in some at - tic — To that, I'll say: "Fie!" *f*

B up in some at - tic — To that, I'll say: "Fie!" *f*

*Ped.*

123

S *mp* Die Ge - dank - en, \_\_\_\_\_ Tho'

A *mp* Die Ge - dank - en, die Ge - dank - en, \_\_\_\_\_ Tho'

T *mp* Die Ge - dank - en, \_\_\_\_\_

B *mp* Die Ge - dank - en, die Ge - dank - en, \_\_\_\_\_

*Ped.*

**D**

129

S you may de - spise them, I shall not dis - guise them,

A you may de - spise them, I shall not dis - guise them,

T You can't co - di - fy them, and

B You can't co - di - fy them, and

Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped.

135

S *mf* Go on and de - ride them; I'm not going to hide them,

A *mf* Go on and de - ride them; I'm not going to hide them,

T I won't de - ny them, *mf* As -

B I won't de - ny them, *mf* As -

Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped.

Opal Palmer Adisa, poet ◦ Margaret & George Alexander, parents ◦ Yehuda Amichai, poet ◦ Bjorn Arneson, generous web designer ◦ Scott Bates, poet ◦ Abbie Betinis, composer/colleague ◦ Dennis Blubaugh, music dealer ◦ Michael deVernon Boblett, poet ◦ Ray Bradbury, writer ◦ Norbert Capek, visionary ◦ e. e. cummings, poet ◦ Philip Dacey, poet ◦ Emily Dickinson, poet ◦ Evelyn Dudley, poet ◦ Rob Eller-Isaacs, minister/writer ◦ Sophia Lyon Fahs, writer ◦ Richard M. Fewkes, writer ◦ Peshia Gertler, poet ◦ Richard S. Gilbert, minister/writer ◦ Jack Gallagher, composer/teacher ◦ Paul Gerike, proofreader ◦ Steve Harper, technical advisor ◦ Steve Hawkins, generous web designer ◦ Edie Hill, composer/colleague ◦ Langston Hughes, poet ◦ Mark Humphrey, piano technician ◦ Karel Husa, composer/teacher ◦ Kalidasa, poet ◦ Garrison Keillor, storyteller ◦ Denise Levertov, poet ◦ George Ella Lyon, poet ◦ Jonathan Machen, artist ◦ Edna St. Vincent Millay, poet ◦ J. David Moore, composer/colleague ◦ Joan Wolf Prefontaine, poet ◦ Gerald Rich, poet ◦ Carl Sandburg, poet ◦ King Sigismund III, religious reformer ◦ Steven Stucky, composer/teacher ◦ Rabindranath Tagore, poet ◦ Howard Thurman, civil rights leader/writer ◦ John Greenleaf Whittier, poet ◦ Theodore S. Lockering Williams, poet ◦ Daniel Winter, pianist/teacher ◦ Nancy Wood, poet ◦ Yehudi Wyner, composer/teacher ◦ Paul Adams, technical advisor

**A LOT OF HARD WORK & CREATIVITY WENT INTO BRINGING THIS MUSIC TO YOU...**



**...AND SOME OF IT WAS EVEN MINE.**

Opal Palmer Adisa, poet ◦ Margaret & George Alexander, parents ◦ Yehuda Amichai, poet ◦ Bjorn Arneson, generous web designer ◦ Scott Bates, poet ◦ Abbie Betinis, composer/colleague ◦ Dennis Blubaugh, music dealer ◦ Michael deVernon Boblett, poet ◦ Ray Bradbury, writer ◦ Norbert Capek, visionary ◦ e. e. cummings, poet ◦ Philip Dacey, poet ◦ Emily Dickinson, poet ◦ Evelyn Dudley, poet ◦ Rob Eller-Isaacs, minister/writer ◦ Sophia Lyon Fahs, writer ◦ Richard M. Fewkes, writer ◦ Peshia Gertler, poet ◦ Richard S. Gilbert, minister/writer ◦ Jack Gallagher, composer/teacher ◦ Paul Gerike, proofreader ◦ Steve Harper, technical advisor ◦ Steve Hawkins, generous web designer ◦ Edie Hill, composer/colleague ◦ Langston Hughes, poet ◦ Mark Humphrey, piano technician ◦ Karel Husa, composer/teacher ◦ Kalidasa, poet ◦ Garrison Keillor, storyteller ◦ Denise Levertov, poet ◦ George Ella Lyon, poet ◦ Jonathan Machen, artist ◦ Edna St. Vincent Millay, poet ◦ J. David Moore, composer/colleague ◦ Joan Wolf Prefontaine, poet ◦ Gerald Rich, poet ◦ Carl Sandburg, poet ◦ King Sigismund III, religious reformer ◦ Steven Stucky, composer/teacher ◦ Rabindranath Tagore, poet ◦ Howard Thurman, civil rights leader/writer ◦ John Greenleaf Whittier, poet ◦ Theodore S. Lockering Williams, poet ◦ Daniel Winter, pianist/teacher ◦ Nancy Wood, poet ◦ Yehudi Wyner, composer/teacher ◦ Paul Adams, technical advisor

**THIS PAGE HAS BEEN INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK.**

**(YOU KNOW WHY.)**

**A COMPLETE PERUSAL COPY MAY BE PURCHASED  
FROM ELIZABETH ALEXANDER AT**

*Seafarer Press*

[www.seafarerpress.com](http://www.seafarerpress.com)

151

S  
A  
T  
B

dank - en sind frei! So don't e - ven try: Die Ge - dank - en sind  
dank - en sind frei! So don't e - ven try: Die Ge - dank - en sind  
So don't e - ven try: Die Ge - dank - en sind  
So don't e - ven try: Die Ge - dank - en sind

Ped. \* Ped. \*

156

S  
A  
T  
B

frei!  
frei!  
frei!  
frei!

161

Anyone!

\* Shouted (with fist raised in the air!): ***f***

"Fie!"

\* I already know what your question is. Is it okay for the conductor, or accompanist, or stage manager, or entire choir to yell the final "Fie!?" I leave it entirely up to you. Have fun. - E.A.

## Selected Choral Music by Elizabeth Alexander

|   |                         |
|---|-------------------------|
| <b>April Rain Song</b> (Langston Hughes) SATB .....   | SEA-006-01              |
| <b>Before the Bread</b> (English folk prayer) SSSS .....  | SEA-023-00              |
| <b>Blessed Be the Flower That Triumphs</b> (Michael deVernon Boblett) SATB .....                                | SEA-078-00              |
| <b>Cherish Your Doubt</b> (Alexander) SATB & piano / SSAA & piano .....   | SEA-063-01 / SEA-063-02 |
| <b>Climb</b> (Edna St. Vincent Millay) SATB & piano .....   | SEA-059-00              |
| <b>Dragon Dance</b> (Elizabeth Alexander) S & piano .....   | SEA-001-00              |
| <b>Die Gedanken Sind Frei</b> (15 <sup>th</sup> century German protest song, arr.) SATB & piano .....           | SEA-087-00              |
| <b>The Earth Called To My Friend</b> (Nancy Wood) SSA & piano .....   | SEA-057-00              |
| <b>Even a Fist Was Once an Open Palm</b> (Yehuda Amichai) SATB .....  | SEA-026-01              |
| <b>Faith Is the Bird That Feels the Light</b> (Rabindranath Tagore) SSA .....                                   | SEA-068-00              |
| <b>Fighting Over What We Believe</b> (Alexander) SAB youth choir, SATB & piano .....                            | SEA-099-00              |
| <b>Finally On My Way To Yes</b> (Pesha Gertler) SSATB & piano .....   | SEA-019-00              |
| <b>Folks, I'm Telling You</b> (Langston Hughes) SSATB & piano .....   | SEA-027-00              |
| <b>For So the Children Come</b> (Sophia Fahs) SATB & piano .....  | SEA-010-00              |
| <b>Glen Song</b> (Scott Bates) SSATB & piano .....  | SEA-025-00              |
| <b>Go Out!</b> (John Murray) SATB & piano .....   | SEA-081-00              |
| <b>I Write This Poem Out of Darkness</b> (George Ella Lyon) SSA, flute, violin & piano .....                    | SEA-024-00              |
| <b>If You Can Walk You Can Dance</b> (Zimbabwean Proverb) SAB & piano / TTB & piano ....                        | SEA-022-03 / SEA-022-05 |
| <b>Immortal Love</b> (John Greenleaf Whittier) SATB .....   | SEA-017-00              |
| <b>Infant Holy, Infant Lowly</b> (arr. Polish carol) SSA .....  | SEA-020-00              |
| <b>The Journey</b> (Evelyn Dudley) TTBB / SATB .....  | SEA-075-00 / SEA-075-01 |
| <b>Jump!</b> (Ray Bradbury) SSA & string quartet .....  | SEA-090-00              |
| <b>Life is not a Garden</b> (Alexander) SATB & piano .....  | SEA-064-00              |
| <b>May This Be a Working Alleluia</b> (Alexander) S children's choir, SATB & piano (opt. flute & 2 trumpets) .. | SEA-098-00              |
| <b>Morning Bread</b> (Amy Lowell) SATB .....  | SEA-060-00              |
| <b>...or a musician</b> (Philip Dacey) SATB & orchestra .....   | SEA-007-00              |
| <b>A Palette To Paint Us As We Are</b> (Gerald Rich) SA & piano / SATB & piano .....                            | SEA-014-00 / SEA-014-01 |
| <b>Praise Wet Snow Falling Early</b> (Denise Levertov) SATB & piano .....                                       | SEA-015-00              |
| <b>Reasons for the Perpetuation of Slavery</b> (Alexander) SSAA .....   | SEA-091-00              |
| <b>Spring Grass</b> (Carl Sandburg) SATB .....  | SEA-006-03              |
| <b>They Have Freckles Everywhere</b> (Alexander) SSAA & piano .....   | SEA-076-00              |
| <b>Those Who Wish To Sing Always Find a Song</b> (Swedish proverb) SSS, oboe & piano .....                      | SEA-022-01              |
| <b>To Make a Prairie</b> (Emily Dickinson) SSA & piano .....  | SEA-016-00              |
| <b>Tomorrow, God Willing</b> (Garrison Keillor) TTBB .....  | SEA-077-00              |
| <b>Trust the Seeds</b> (Alexander) SATB .....   | SEA-009-00              |
| <b>We Lift Up Our Hearts</b> (Richard Fewkes) Children's choir, SATB & piano .....                              | SEA-021-00              |
| <b>We Remember Them</b> (Sylvan Kamens & Jack Riemer) SATB & piano .....  | SEA-083-01              |
| <b>Where There Is Light in the Soul</b> (Chinese proverb) SAB/SATB .....  | SEA-070-00 / SEA-070-01 |
| <b>When the Song of the Angels Is Stilled</b> (Howard Thurman) SSAA / TTBB .....                                | SEA-062-04 / SEA-062-02 |
| <b>Why I Pity the Woman Who Never Spills</b> (Joan Wolf Prefontaine) SSAA .....                                 | SEA-058-00              |
| <b>CD: Finally On My Way To Yes</b> — Award-winning choral works by Elizabeth Alexander .....                   | SEA-CD-001              |

*For a complete catalog of over 60 pieces for mixed, women's, men's & children's choirs,  
along with recordings and score excerpts, visit:*

*Seafarer Press ~ [www.seafarerpress.com](http://www.seafarerpress.com)*