Die Gedanken Sind Frei
(My Thoughts Are Free)

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

SATB, piano

Elizabeth Alexander
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. 16th 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 16th 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.

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

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fence can confine them, No creed undermine them, They

fence can confine them, No creed undermine them, They

fence can confine them, No creed undermine them, They

fence can confine them, No creed undermine them, They

ring from on high: Die Gedanken sind frei, they

ring from on high: Die Gedanken sind frei, they

ring from on high: Die Gedanken sind frei, they

ring from on high: Die Gedanken sind frei, they
A lot of hard work & creativity went into bringing this music to you...

...and some of it was even mine.

This page has been intentionally left blank.

You know why.)

A complete perusal copy may be purchased from Elizabeth Alexander at

Seafarer Press

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soar to the sky, they soar to the sky.

soar to the sky, they soar to the sky.

soar to the sky, they soar to the sky.

soar to the sky, they soar to the sky.

*  

die Gedanken sind frei.

die Gedanken sind frei.

die Gedanken sind frei.

die Gedanken sind frei.
you try to bind my thoughts in a prison, the next day you'll find that
you try to bind my thoughts in a prison, the next day you'll find that
you try to bind my thoughts in a prison, the next day you'll find that
you try to bind my thoughts in a prison, the next day you'll find that
rallentando

they have arisen. A brain-storm will thunder and burst chains a-

rallentando

they have arisen. A brain-storm will thunder and burst chains a-

rallentando

they have arisen. A brain-storm will thunder and burst chains a-

a tempo

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

...AND SOME OF IT WAS EVEN MINE.

THIS PAGE HAS BEEN INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK.

(YOU KNOW WHY.)

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C freely, with a dramatic flair

liable to change as I become older, so

colla voce

---

don't think it strange if they become bolder! (r!)

---

They won't remain static, packed

---

They won't remain static, packed

---

They won't remain static, packed

---

They won't remain static, packed
up in some attic—To that, I'll say: "Fie!"

Die Gedanken, Tho'

Die Gedanken, die Gedanken, Tho'

Die Gedanken, die Gedanken,
you may despise them, I shall not disguise them,

you may despise them, I shall not disguise them,

You can't codify them, and

you may despise them, I shall not disguise them,

You can't codify them, and

Go on and ride them; I'm not going to hide them,

Go on and ride them; I'm not going to hide them,

I won't deny them,

I won't deny them,
A LOT OF HARD WORK & CREATIVITY WENT INTO BRINGING THIS MUSIC TO YOU...

AND SOME OF IT WAS EVEN MINE.

THIS PAGE HAS BEEN INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK.

(YOU KNOW WHY.)

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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.
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