

Die Gedanken Sind Frei

(My Thoughts Are Free)

*A Protest Song from the 16th century German Peasant Wars,
with new English lyrics*

alto voice, baritone voice and 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. 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.



English translation & additional lyrics
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The little guy on the cover is a 15th 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!

Arrangement created for Susan Peck and John Hubert

Die Gedanken Sind Frei

(My thoughts are free)

Duet for Alto and Baritone, with piano accompaniment

16th century German protest song
English lyrics* and arrangement by Elizabeth Alexander

(♩=63-66)

A

B

Piano

mp

Die Ge -

9

A

B

- dan - ken sind_ frei, I proud - ly pro - fess them. As hard as you_ try, you

Ped. * Ped. * Ped. * Ped. * Ped. * Ped. *

15

A

B

can - not sup - press them. No fence can con - fine them, No creed un - der - mine them, They

Ped. * Ped. * Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. *

2

21

A *mf* They ring from on

B ring from on high: Die Ge - dan - ken sind frei, they ring from on

mf

Ped. Ped. * Ped. *

26

A high: Die Ge - dan - ken sind frei!

B high: Die Ge - dan - ken sind frei!

mp subito

Ped. *

31

A *mp* They

B *mp* They

r.h. *p subito*

l.h.

36 **A**

A *mf*
 laugh like a child, and sing and make mer - ry. They bloom ev - er wild, like

B *mf*
 laugh like a child, and sing and make mer - ry. They bloom ev - er wild, like

mp
 Ped. * Ped. *

42

A *f* *p subito*
 flow'rs on a prai - rie. They wind and they wan - der, they pen - sive - ly

B *f* *p subito*
 flow'rs on a prai - rie. They wind and they wan - der, they pen - sive - ly

mf *p subito*
 Ped. * Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped.

48

A *mp*
 pon - der, they soar to the sky, die Ge - dan - ken sind frei, they

B *mp*
 pon - der, they soar to the sky, die Ge - dan - ken sind frei, they

mp
 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 ◦ Peshu 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 Tullering Williams, poet ◦ Daniel Winter, pianist/teacher ◦ Nancy Wood, poet ◦ Yehudi Wyner, composer/teacher ◦ Paul Adams, technical advisor ◦ 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 ◦ Peshu 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 Tullering Williams, poet ◦ Daniel Winter, pianist/teacher ◦ Nancy Wood, poet ◦ Yehudi Wyner, composer/teacher ◦ Paul Adams, technical advisor ◦ Opal Palmer Adisa, poet ◦ Margaret & George Alexander, parents

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...AND SOME OF IT WAS EVEN MINE.

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B

75

A you try to bind my thoughts in a pri - son, *f* A

B *mf* The next day you'll find that they have a - ris - en. A *f*

grandly

mf

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

83 **rallentando** **a tempo** *mp innocently*

A brain - storm will thun - der and burst chains a - sun - der, *port.* And

B brain - storm will thun - der and burst chains a - sun - der,*

rallentando **a tempo**

Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. *

90 *mf*

A off they_ will_ fly! Die Ge - dan - ken sind frei! And off they_ will_ fly! Die Ge - dan - ken sind

B *mp innocently* Die Ge - dan - ken sind frei! And off they_ will_ fly! Die Ge - dan - ken sind

mp innocently *mf*

Ped. * Ped. * Ped. * Ped. * Ped. *

6

97 **rit.**

A frei!

B frei! **(mf)** They're

pesante (and a little ornery) **rit.**

Ped. * Ped. Ped. * Ped. Ped. * Ped. * Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped.

105 **C** **freely, with a dramatic flair**

B lia - ble to change as I be - come old - er, so don't think it strange if they be - come bold - er!_ (r!)*

colla voce

Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped. *

* Yes, go ahead and growl a little here!

114 **a tempo** **(mf)** **f**

A They won't re - main stat - ic, packed up in some at - tic — To that, I'll say:

B They won't re - main stat - ic, packed up in some at - tic — To that, I'll say: **f**

a tempo

121 *mp* *sweetly*

A "Fie!" Die Ge - dank - en, die Ge - dank - en, Die Ge - dank - en,

B "Fie!" Die Ge - dank - en, Die Ge - dank - en, Tho'

mp *sweetly*

mp *sweetly*

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

129 **D** **Gradually growing more and more defiant...**

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

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

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

135 *mf*

A I won't de - ny them, As -

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

mf

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

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160

A Shout (Raise that fist into the air!): *f*
"Fie!"

B Shout (Raise that fist into the air!): *f*
"Fie!"

Elizabeth Alexander spent her childhood in the Carolinas and Appalachian Ohio, the daughter of a minister and a piano teacher. Her passion for language and music is reflected in her catalogue of over 100 songs and choral works, which have received many national and international awards.

Reviews of her music have referred to “the close personal resonance between the composer and the words,” as well as her music’s “delicacy and sincerity,” “elegance,” and “freshness within a well-known language.”

Performers of her music have included instrumental ensembles such as Charleston Symphony Orchestra, Minnesota Philharmonic Orchestra, Wisconsin Chamber Orchestra, North/South Consonance, Society for New Music, and Sounds New; solo singers such as Ruth MacKenzie, Bradley Greenwald and Janet Youngdahl; and over 1000 choirs, including VocalEssence, Elmer Iseler Singers, Gregg Smith Singers, New York Virtuoso Singers, Cornell University Chorus, MUSE, San Francisco Gay Mens Chorus, Anima, and the entire student body of Waunakee Elementary School.



Among her composition teachers were Jack Gallagher at The College of Wooster, and Steven Stucky, Yehudi Wyner and Karel Husa at Cornell University, from which she received her doctorate in music composition. She has received awards, grants and fellowships from the Jerome Foundation, New York Council on the Arts, Wisconsin Arts Board, National Orchestral Association, International League of Women Composers, and American Composers Forum.

Alexander lives in St. Paul, MN, where her frequent commissions include works for orchestra, chorus, chamber ensembles and solo musicians. She reads voraciously, shamelessly encourages her teenagers’ jokes, and tends her garden during the three month period in Minnesota that is not winter. She believes she has the best job in the world.

For more information about her music, CDs, commissions and current projects, visit:

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