

Colour, Poetry...

January 21, 2017

"One cannot live any longer on politics, on balance-sheets, and crossword puzzles. One cannot live any longer without poetry, colour, love" – words of Antoine de St Exupéry (1900–1944), French aristocrat, aviator and writer, not Catholic, but struggling in his soul with 20th century materialism. He said of himself, "I am a man raking through ashes, a man struggling to find the embers of life in the bottom of a fireplace." And describing in his philosophic memoir *Wind, Sand and Stars* (1939) a scene of workers and their families huddled all over a night train from Paris to Warsaw, he wrote that he was tormented not by their desolate condition, but by "seeing, a little bit in all these men, of Mozart murdered."

These quotes come to mind after a visit last year to the *Bertramka*, a villa lying close outside the centre of Prague in the Czech Republic, and made known in the late 18th century by visits there of the famous composer, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. At that time it was reached from the city by a half-hour walk along country roads and a path lined with horse chestnuts to the gate into the front courtyard, opening onto a sloping garden with flower-beds and fruit-trees. Today the shady lane has given way to an enormous shopping and business centre along a city street loaded with heavy traffic, heeding only the traffic-lights. The gate is still there but the sloping garden has run wild, with a lonely statue of the great musician and with the stone table where he is supposed to have finished composing his world-renowned opera *Don Giovanni*. Soon afterwards he conducted its first performance in the city opera-house, still in use. As for the two rooms occupied in the *Bertramka* by Mozart, they have been faithfully preserved, but a once handsome collection of Mozartian exhibits was no longer there this October. The *Bertramka* still has atmosphere,

but much there whispers only of "Mozart murdered."

Yet 18th century Prague had been very kind to him. In 1786, unlike Vienna, it gave a rapturous reception to Mozart's equally popular and famous opera *the Marriage of Figaro*, as it gave in the following year to *Don Giovanni*. And when Mozart died in 1791, his home city, Vienna, gave him merely a poor man's grave, whereas Prague honoured him with a lavish Requiem Mass attended by thousands, and performed by a hundred musicians refusing any payment. It was Catholic Emperors and nobles who, to restore Catholic Bohemia after the devastating 30 years' religious war (1618–1648), had established widespread musical education for Bohemian youth to be able to play music in Church services. It was this Catholic education which generated in Prague a public capable immediately of loving Mozart and his music.

Can the same be said for Catholics today, or are we also "murderers of Mozart"? For St Exupéry, Mozart was somehow the very opposite of materialism. But how many Traditionalists today are bored with a sung Mass, and cannot wait to get back to their balance-sheets and crossword-puzzles? Alas, are not many of our boys almost ashamed of knowing how to sing? And as for our girls, Oh my! Would a mass of them not prefer to be astronauts or volleyball stars rather than know how to play a musical instrument which might help them to civilise their husbands, humanise their children and put harmony in their home? A German proverb says that men make the culture but women transmit it. Is it not suicidal for a society not to promote in its girls the true "culture, poetry and love" which will go deep into their future families and through their families into society?

As for Mozart, he is certainly not the height of spirituality in Western music, and later in life he did join Freemasonry, then fashionable in Vienna. But he is far more spiritual than the world of shopping centres and traffic lights, as St

Exupéry well saw, and it was certainly not Masons but deeply Catholic parents who formed in the child and youth the Catholic heart from which sprang all the spirituality of the music of the adult. Surely the most often performed piece of all Mozart's music, composed shortly before he died, is his *Ave Verum Corpus*, because it is so frequently performed at Mass. And his deeply Catholic *Requiem* he was still composing on his deathbed. May his soul rest in peace.

Kyrie eleison.