

Mozart Questioned

June 2, 2018

After issue # 550 of these “Comments” highly praised Mozart (Jan 27, 2018), a reader wrote privately to say that he had a problem with the famous composer: Mozart was an enthusiastic Freemason, he completed in the second half of his life no major work for the Catholic Church, and his operas treat of man-woman relations and of morality in a very casual manner. Now music is so important in people’s souls that this reader’s objections deserve to be answered in public, so that people who do not yet know Mozart may be encouraged – obviously not forced – to make of him the music of their leisure moments. So let us highlight some principles for each of the reader’s three objections.

That Mozart was a Freemason raises a most important principle: the artist and his art are not separate, but they are distinct. What makes the moral goodness of the artist as a person is not the same as what makes the artistic goodness of the artefacts that he produces (Summa Theologiae, 1a 2ae, Q57, Art. 3). Thus Picasso was a personal scoundrel, but his art, purely as art, is brilliant, whereas countless Victorian painters may have been personally very moral, but their paintings are as dull as ditch-water. Thus Masonry certainly entered into some of Mozart’s later music, notably the “Magic Flute,” but the music stands on its own feet, and it certainly owes its beauty not to Masonry’s war on God, but to Mozart’s Catholic parents and his early upbringing in the highly Catholic Austria of the Empress Maria-Theresa.

That, secondly, the mature Mozart never completed another major work for the Church is true insofar as the C Minor Mass and the Requiem are unfinished, but how often those two works are played, and with what religious effect! Also, is there any piece of music so often played or sung in Catholic churches and chapels as Mozart’s “Ave Verum Corpus”? And if we

distinguish music implicitly from explicitly Catholic, can anyone deny that Mozart, like Shakespeare, is a tremendous carrier of Catholic values, in Mozart's case the values of harmony, order, beauty and joy for countless listeners? And are not these great artists, implicitly and by heritage Catholic, a mercy of God to enable post-Catholics to enjoy Catholic values without realising it? If post-Catholics did realise it, would they not repudiate those values like the arrant liberals presently "de-constructing" Shakespeare in the so-called "universities" and no doubt Mozart in the "music conservatories"? In fact, can today's liberal actors and musicians get anywhere near the heart of Shakespeare or Mozart? What does that say about that heart? Not liberal!

And thirdly, that some of Mozart's operas are in part so light-hearted as to have incurred the scorn of Beethoven – "Never could I write such frivolous operas," he said – leaves out of view the serious part of the same operas. Alongside Zerlina's flirting are the flames of Don Giovanni's damnation, alongside the Count's philandering is his sincere apology to his suffering Countess; alongside the Seraglio is the highlighting of forgiveness. Real life in a fallen world is both comic and serious. See how at the beginning of "Don Giovanni," Mozart combines musically a duellist's duel and death with the burbling panic of Don Giovanni's rabbit-servant, Leporello. Surely Mozart, like Shakespeare, "saw life steadily and saw it whole," as Matthew Arnold said of Sophocles.

However, one side of Mozart does remain that of a naughty boy (cf. the film "Amadeus"), and he is an integral part of a Christendom already decadent at the end of the 18th century. But, when compared with the downfall of music ever since, is his music not almost angelic, without its being so far removed from our own times that it can seem inaccessible? Any man harms his soul by getting used to listening to music which is trash, with little or no intrinsic value of melody, harmony or

rhythm. He will not usually harm his soul by getting used to Mozart, on the contrary.

Kyrie eleison.