Four-and-a-half

by Leona Francombe

I wish I could pretend that squeezing into a small Škoda with four ample Czech musicians and their instruments is not an elaborate exercise. But there is the Czech devotion to eating to consider, always a liability in tight places, and the lingering odours of lunch. Then there are the various ribald jokes, especially from the back seat, and testy comments about whether we've made a wrong turn. Someone invariably bursts into song. The concert starts in Antwerp in only two hours, and we have already circled Brussels twice looking for an exit. *Žádný problém!* No problem. It's just the sort of situation that Czechs thrive on.

If the four winds were to blow through Prague, they would meet in this quartet: visionary, romantic, wag, sage. They manage to pull their four temperaments together into a single, burnished sound; four gold threads in a seamless mantle. Together they also happen to embody the Czech Everyman – the gentle, clever, emotional Slav with music in his soul. EU, beware this melodious new member!

Stop the average Czech on the street and ask him about belonging to the EU, and he is careful with his reply. Bohemia has always belonged to someone: Habsburgs, Nazis, Communists. Even the former Czechoslovakia was a forced marriage, annulled, to the relief of both sides, in 1993. When the borders finally opened in 1989, the entire country lay down its burden for the first time in living memory. Who cannot rejoice at that?

But it is impossible not to imagine another image: a cage of endangered birds with their door suddenly flung wide, and a fox creeping in unseen from the woods. You need only to stand on Wenceslas Square to witness this. Zara, C&A, Benetton, Nike *et alia* have stolen into the coop, along with an ugly rash of casinos and discos. It all looks like Rue Neuve now, or Oxford Street. Even the tourist boutiques display a suspicious sameness, and local hand-made trinkets and jewellery are almost impossible to find. This new belonging to a greater union has exacted

Czechs and Mozart

a price, clearly, but how high, and for what reward, is not evident to many Czechs.

The hasty lunch of *frites* has worn off, and the Škoda is restive. Karel, the romantic, waxes mistily in the back seat on the subject of *svícková*, a temperamental delicacy that takes days to prepare. The car lapses into appreciative silence. We can all taste the perfect cut of tenderloin, the alchemy of sour cream and parsnip, and that other Czech culinary Grail, the hard-won dumpling. "You can't find a good *svícková* in Prague anymore," grumbles Lubomir, the wag. "Everything's low-fat." An air of martyrdom sets in.

Ah, those martyrs. Czechs revere them, a rich tapestry of characters stretching back into the early Bohemian mists: Saint John of Nepomuk, hurled into the Vltava River in 1393; Jan Hus, burned at the stake in 1415; the 27 Protestant nobles beheaded in 1621; Jan Palach, who set fire to himself on Wenceslas Square in 1969.

Since the Velvet Revolution, the place of Palach's martyrdom has become a shrine. Candles and faded flowers litter the spot. It's strange, this passion for martyrdom, as if the Czech Everyman distils his fervent love of country into the dramatic deeds of his compatriots. He is happy to let them shoulder the ropes and crosses. The average Czech is more poet than warrior, after all, and would rather talk than shoot. His best ammunition is always a well-placed quip. No character personifies this better than Jaroslav Hašek's hero of *The Good Soldier Švejk*, that deceptively silly rogue who single-handedly turns Austro-Hungary into a farce. Švejks can still be found, but they are more subdued now, a little leaner, perhaps, and as likely to reach for a Merlot as for the time-honoured Pilsner.

We arrive in Antwerp with 40 minutes to spare. The five of us stumble onto the darkened stage of de Singel to rehearse. Bretislav, the visionary, unfolds his music stand and warms up with characteristic zeal. "Music must make you cry or make you dance," he says to no one in particular. "Otherwise, it's worth nothing." He draws his bow impishly over the strings and produces a quivering, unctuous note. Then he stamps his foot and hangs half-way out of his chair for a polka.

"To heck with dancing," mutters Lubomir. "It would help to have some light." A technician finally appears and the stage shines emptily in the glare. The piano stands marooned like a volcanic rock. The harsh light reveals an unfortunate discovery: Lubomir is still wearing jeans. "*Pro pana krale!*" utters Jan, the sage. It is the most he has spoken all afternoon. For heaven's sake. "Where are your tuxedo pants?"

"In Brussels," Lubomir answers moodily, tuning his viola. He wanders off to the café for coffee. Twenty minutes later, he reappears in a pair of ill-fitting black trousers, grinning sheepishly. He has swapped his jeans with the waiter.

The audience settles, the hall whispers and stills. Bretislav, Lubomir and Jan attack the opening theme of Mozart's G minor piano quartet. They play with an old-generation sound, daring, heartfelt, never slaves to perfection. But it is not the wash of colour, the conviction, the sheer guts of those first measures that almost makes me miss my cue. No. I've made the mistake of glancing down at Lubomir's trousers. They are riding high on his calf, exposing an unsightly stretch of pale, fish-like skin. *Žádný problém*. The listeners have closed their eyes with the beauty of his sound.

Written as a fond tribute to my mother, Ludmila Fišerová Francombe, and her incomparable svícková

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SHUTTERSTOCK

Musical fellows: a Czech band injects some life into the neighbourhood