

michael morpurgo



The Mozart Question

The Mozart Question – Playing for their Lives

'...I'll just tell you their story my own way, about how they lived together, how they nearly died together and how they were saved by music.

"The three of them were brought by train to the concentration camp from all over Europe: Benjamin from Paris, Mama from Warsaw, Papa from here, from Venice; all musicians, all Jewish and all bound for the gas chamber and extermination like so many millions. They survived only because they were able to say yes to one question put to them by an SS officer on arrival at the camp. "Is there anyone amongst you who can play an orchestral instrument, who is a professional musician?" They did not know when they stepped forward that they would at once be separated from their families, would have to watch them being herded off towards those hellish chimneys, never to be seen again.

There were auditions of course, and by now they knew they were playing for their lives...'

(The Mozart Question, Pages 49-52)

"At first they gave concerts only for the SS officers. Papa said you just had to pretend they were not there. You simply lost yourself in the music – it was the only way. Even when they applauded you did not look up..."

(The Mozart Question, Page 54)

"One cold morning with snow on the ground, they were made to assemble out in the compound with their instruments and ordered to sit down and play close to the camp gates. The train arrived, the wagons packed with new prisoners. Once they were all out they lined up and then divided. The old and young and the frail were herded past the orchestra on their way, they were told, to the shower block; the able bodied, those fit for work, were taken off towards the huts. And all the while Mama and Papa and Benjamin and the others played their Mozart. They all understood soon enough what it was for – to calm the terror, to beguile each new trainload into a false sense of security. They were part of a deadly sham."

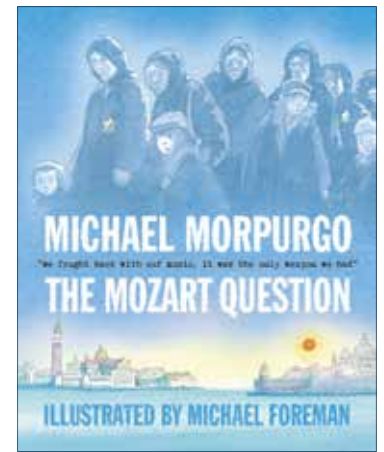
(The Mozart Question – Pages 57 and 60)

Discuss the role of the orchestra at the concentration camp in further detail. Imagine you step off the train and are greeted by the sound of Mozart. How might that make you feel?

Play a piece of Mozart. As you are listening to it draw a picture of the images and pictures that appear in your head.

Can you describe how the music made you feel?

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The Mozart Question – Milan, London, New York

'Benjamin lived up a narrow flight of stairs in one small room with a bed in one corner and a basin in the other. On the wall were lots of concert posters. "Some of the concerts I played," he said. "Milan, London, New York. Wonderful places, wonderful people, wonderful music. It is a wonderful world out there..."

(The Mozart Question – Page 36)

Design a poster advertising one of Benjamin's concerts.

