

NAXOS
AudioBooks

JUNIOR
CLASSICS

The Finest Nonsense

— OF —



EDWARD LEAR

Read by **Sir Derek Jacobi**

1	The Owl and the Pussycat	2:07
2	The Duck and the Kangaroo	2:18
3	Assorted Limericks I	2:50
4	The Daddy Long-Legs and the Fly	4:10
5	The Jumblies	4:45
6	The Nutcrackers and the Sugar-Tongs	3:10
7	Calico Pie	1:29
8	Nonsense Alphabet I	5:33
9	Assorted Limericks II	2:49
10	The Broom, the Shovel, the Poker and the Tongs	2:29
11	The Table and the Chair	1:44
12	Nonsense Cookery	1:47

13	The Dong with a Luminous Nose	6:44
14	The Two Old Bachelors	3:11
15	The Pelican Chorus	4:56
16	Assorted Limericks III	3:03
17	The Courtship of the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo	5:05
18	The Pobble Who Has No Toes	2:46
19	The New Vestments	3:02
20	Nonsense Alphabet II	5:10
21	Assorted Limericks IV	2:41
22	The Quangle Wangle's Hat	2:51
23	Self-Portrait of the Laureate of Nonsense	2:04

Total running time: 76:59 • 1 CD

The Finest Nonsense

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EDWARD LEAR

The author of *The Owl and the Pussycat*, 19th-century poet Edward Lear, is now best known for his nonsense rhymes and limericks. But Lear himself would be surprised by this. For him, writing poetry was only a sideline – his main profession was as a landscape artist.

Edward Lear (1812–1888) was an English painter and travel writer in the time of Queen Victoria. His life is full of surprising twists and turns. Many of his friends were rich lords and ladies, yet his family was poor. He moved in fashionable society, yet saw himself as a misfit, even an outcast.

Lear was born in Holloway, in north London, the 20th of 21 children. In those

days large families were not so unusual, and many of Edward's brothers and sisters had died as infants. His father, Jeremiah, was a stockbroker, but when Edward was four his business failed, and he was sent to prison for debt. The family had to move out of their large house and rent it out.

Lear was a sickly child, with poor eyesight and asthma. With her financial worries, his mother couldn't cope with him, so she put him into the care of his big sister Ann, who was then 25. Kindly Ann looked after the boy and educated him at home. She also encouraged Edward's talent for drawing and painting. By the age of 15 he had started

to make money selling beautiful sketches of animals and birds.

In 1832 Lear's drawings came to the attention of an aristocrat called Edward Stanley, Earl of Derby. The earl became Lear's patron (supporter) and invited him to come and stay at his house, Knowsley Hall, near Liverpool, to draw his collection of animals. Lear spent much of the next five years at Knowsley. A charming and talented young man, he made friends with the lords and ladies who visited Knowsley, many of whom also became patrons. He entertained the earl's family and visitors with his drawings and his funny poems and songs, which he performed on the piano.

Lear's early career was promising, but by his mid-20s his prospects were harmed by poor health. His eyesight became so bad that he had to give up the close work involved in making detailed illustrations of animals. The cold, damp English winters also made his asthma worse. In 1837 he decided to leave Britain for the sunny Mediterranean, and become a landscape painter.

Lear travelled to Italy and lived in Rome for most of the next ten years. Later he lived on the Greek island of Corfu and in southern France. He travelled widely in Europe, visited the Near East, Egypt and India, and began to publish books of his illustrations. He was a restless soul, continually moving on. He kept in touch with his family, patrons and other English friends through letters. Lear was a very keen letter-writer, thinking nothing of writing 35 letters before breakfast! Many letters were illustrated with funny drawings, including those of himself with a bushy beard, thick spectacles, large stomach and long legs.

In the 1830s Lear had come across a book of poetry called *Anecdotes and Adventures of Fifteen Gentlemen*. These short, amusing five-line poems had a form which Lear would make famous. For Lear, this form of verse lent itself to a 'limitless variety for rhymes and pictures'. Today we call it a limerick, and this short form was ideally suited to Lear's taste for the absurd.

In a limerick, the first and second

lines rhyme with one another. The third and fourth lines (sometimes written as one line) contain a different rhyme. In Lear's limericks, the last line echoes the first or second line. Other limerick poets made the last line into a fresh rhyme with the first two, becoming a 'punchline'. But Lear's limericks return us to the beginning, stressing the nonsensical nature of the poem.

Lear began to write down the limericks he had composed for the children at Knowsley Hall, illustrating them with his drawings, and in 1846 he published his first poetry, *A Book of Nonsense*, under the strange pen name of Derry down Derry. It contained the following poem, which sums up his aim in writing nonsense verse:

*There was an Old Derry down Derry,
Who loved to see little folks merry;
So he made them a book,
And with laughter they shook
At the fun of that Derry down Derry.*

The book was a great success. In the 1870s Lear followed up with more

nonsense poetry. *Nonsense Songs* of 1870 contained some of his most famous poems, *The Owl and the Pussy-cat* and *The Jumblies*. *More Nonsense* of 1972 contained many limericks, while *Laughable Lyrics* (1877) contained some of his most fantastic creations – *The Pobble Who Has No Toes*, and *The Dong with a Luminous Nose*. All proved very popular with children. Many children's books at the time were intended to educate or 'improve' young people, and had a moralising, preachy tone. Lear was never preachy, and children loved the fact that his grown-ups often misbehaved.

Although he was popular with children, Lear had none of his own, and never married. This was probably because he had what he saw as a shameful secret: from early childhood, he suffered from an illness called epilepsy, which involves having fits without warning. Nowadays doctors understand this condition and can control it with medicine, but in Lear's day it was seen as something shameful. Lear fell in love several times, but never proposed, probably because he didn't

want to give away his secret. He had many friends but he saw himself as an outsider and was essentially a 'loner'.

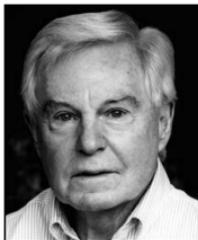
Many of his characters are also oddities, rejected by society, with Lear referring to them as 'they'. Many are rule-breakers, who don't conform to what society expects of them. In some of his limericks people approve of their actions, but often they don't, and the rule-breakers are punished by being beaten or 'smashed', or even killed. Lear may have felt that his secret illness set him apart from society, and that he would have been rejected if the truth of his epilepsy had been known.

He spent his last years in Italy with his faithful servant Giorgio and his cat Foss, and died at the ripe age of 75.

Nearly 150 years since his poetry was first published, Lear's nonsense rhymes are still popular. Why should this be? The children of Lear's own day delighted in the unusual opportunity he gave to laugh at grown-ups. They loved the insight that adults could be, and often were, naughty. Some are punished for it, but others get away with it, or

simply don't care if society rejects them. In modern times, with our love of the individual, Lear's poems give the clear message that it's interesting, funny and okay to be different, and that message is just as relevant now as it was in Lear's own day.

Notes by Jen Green



Sir Derek Jacobi is known to younger audiences through his work on the BBC series *In the Night Garden* and the films *Nanny McPhee* and *Cinderella*. He is one of Britain's leading actors, having made his mark on stage, film and television, as well as audiobook. His extensive theatrical credits, from London's West End to Broadway, include numerous roles encompassing the whole range of theatre.

The music on this recording was taken from the NAXOS catalogue

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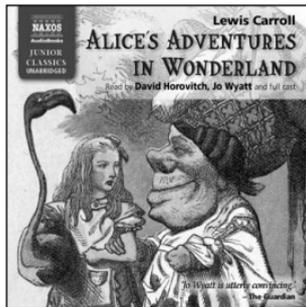
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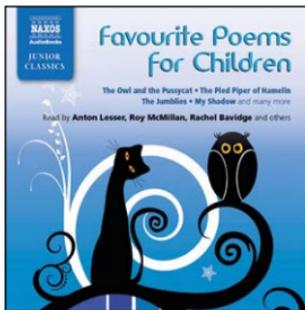
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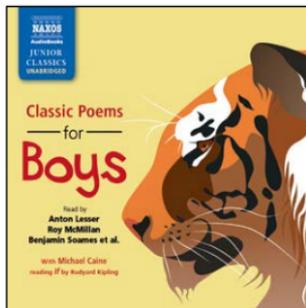
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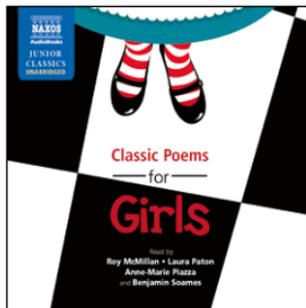
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