

# The Great Poets John Keats

Read by **Samuel West** and **Michael Sheen**  
with **Simon Russell Beale** and **Sarah Woodward**



---

1	Great Spirits now on Earth are sojourning *	0:48
2	Much have I travelled in the realms of gold *	0:46
3	On the sea *	0:45
4	Wherein lies happiness? *	1:08
5	On Sitting Down to read King Lear once Again *	0:57
6	Bright Star! Would I were steadfast as thou *	0:53
7	Old Meg she was a Gipsy *	1:04
8	Deep in the shady sadness of a vale *	4:26
9	A casement high and triple-arched there was *	1:04
10	Ode to a Nightingale ^	5:10
11	Ode on Melancholy ^	1:46
12	Why did I laugh tonight? No voice will tell *	0:59

---

13	La Belle Dame Sans Merci ^	2:09
14	Ode on a Grecian Urn ^	3:11
15	To Sleep *	0:52
16	Ode to Psyche *	3:47
17	A haunting music, sole perhaps and lone *	1:46
18	To Autumn ^	2:03
19	This living hand, now warm and capable *	0:33
20	When I have fears that I may cease to be *	0:58
21	From Endymion ^	1:27
22	Fancy ^	3:57
23	There was a naughty boy +	0:34
24	The Eve of St Agnes *=	26:10

**Total time 68:08**

Samuel West \*  
Michael Sheen ^  
Simon Russell Beale +  
Sarah Woodward =

---

# The Great Poets

## John Keats

John Keats was born in London on the 31st October, 1795. Two brothers, George and Tom, and a sister, Fanny, followed during the next eight years. Their father, Thomas Keats, helped in the management of his father-in-law's stables and tavern; their mother, Frances Jennings, was from a well-to-do business family, and seems to have been an intelligent, well-educated and forceful woman.

Young John was himself, by all accounts, of a passionate, possessive, even wilful character: 'violent and ungovernable', said a family servant in later years. When he was eight, John began to attend a school in Enfield run by the sympathetic and imaginative John Clarke; but, within a year, the first of the many domestic tragedies which were to afflict the family occurred – his father was killed in a riding accident. A mere two months later, and apparently to the

displeasure of John and his siblings, their mother remarried. Before long, the children went to live with their grandmother in Edmonton. In 1810, when John was barely fifteen, his mother, now abandoned by her husband and living in poverty, died.

1814 saw the death of his grandmother, Mrs Jennings, and in the following year Keats entered Guy's Hospital as a student, qualifying as an apothecary in July 1816. This was the year when his passion for poetry – and for politics, philosophy and the arts in general – truly took hold of him. His circle of acquaintances rapidly enlarged to include such radical thinkers and artists as Leigh Hunt, Hazlitt and Benjamin Haydon. By December, Keats had abandoned medicine in order to pursue his vocation as a poet.

Barely five years of life remained to him, but within that time he was to live with an

---

intensity, a gusto and a creative urgency which would lead directly to the extraordinary poems and letters we have today.

By 1816 Keats was enjoying the first excitement of an independent, if insecure, literary life. The remaining years were to be dominated by the poetry, of course, but also by a consuming interest in the value and purpose of poetic composition and the nature of the poet himself. At the same time, Keats enjoyed travelling the length and breadth of the British Isles, often walking huge distances in a day; continuing his education by reading everything he could lay his hands on; developing radical political views in a post-war England dominated by timidly conservative attitudes; and, finally, falling in love.

Yet hanging over all this intense pursuit of pleasure, self-knowledge and poetic perfection was the cloud of the 'family' illness – tuberculosis, or consumption as it was then known. His beloved brother Tom died of the disease in December 1818 after a long illness, during the latter stages of which Keats had patiently

nursed him. The agony of this loss must have been intensified by the absence of his other brother, George, who had married and emigrated to America earlier in the same year. Within another year, Keats himself had begun to show the first symptoms of tuberculosis. He had now to confront the real possibility of his own death within a few years – or even months – his emotional turmoil infinitely complicated by the simultaneous ripening of his love for Fanny Brawne into an engagement, probably in December 1819.

Not long after the onset of the disease, Keats' poetic composition began to falter, the last of his major poems – 'To Autumn' – being written in September 1819: he found the activity of writing emotionally exhausting, perhaps disturbing, especially as he tried to come to terms with the apparent impossibility of sustaining the relationship with Fanny, whom he could no longer see – unless it were by arrangement, when she would greet him through the window from the garden of Wentworth Place. This distance had become necessary after the crisis of

---

February 1820, when Keats had returned to Hampstead on the outside of the coach: he staggered home to Wentworth Place, both chilled and feverish, and coughed blood as he got himself to bed. With extraordinary calmness, Keats asked his friend Brown to bring a candle by which he could inspect the discharge, and then announced: 'I know the colour of that blood; it is arterial blood. I cannot

be deceived in that colour. That drop of blood is my death-warrant. I must die.'

Keats' last hope seemed to lie in a kinder climate, and to that end he set sail for Italy in September 1820. He died on 23rd February, 1821, at 26 Piazza di Spagna.

### Notes by Perry Keenlyside



**Samuel West** was widely praised for his performance as Leonard Bast in the Merchant Ivory film, *Howard's End*. Other film credits include *Carrington* and *Reunion*, and he has been seen on TV in *Persuasion* and *Heavy Weather*. Theatrical roles have included Valentine in *Arcadia* and Algernon in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. He also reads *Great Narrative Poems of the Romantic Age*, *Great Speeches in History*, *Peter Pan*, and Lord Windermere in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, for Naxos AudioBooks.



**Michael Sheen** has been seen widely on stage and screen. His major theatrical roles include *Henry V* (RSC), *Peer Gynt* (directed by Ninagawa), Jimmy Porter in *Look Back In Anger* as well as appearances in Pinter's *Moonlight* and *The Homecoming*. Among his film work is *Wilde*, *Mary Reilly* and *Othello*. Since leaving RADA, he has recorded extensively for Naxos AudioBooks, reading Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and *The Idiot*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Great Poems of the Romantic Age* and *Oedipus the King*. He has also directed and read the part of Romeo in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Stories from Shakespeare* for Naxos AudioBooks.



**Simon Russell Beale** is one of Britain's leading classical actors. He won Best Actor in the Evening Standard Awards for his individual interpretation of *Hamlet*, and his Ariel in *The Tempest* was marked by an Olivier Award. Among his many other starring roles in London theatre was *Candide* and Mosca in *Volpone*. He has a busy career in TV and film too, with appearances in Branagh's production of *Hamlet* and in the outstanding TV dramatization of *Persuasion*. For Naxos AudioBooks he has also recorded *The Life of Oscar Wilde*, *Great Speeches and Soliloquies* of Shakespeare and *A Life of Shakespeare*.



**Sarah Woodward** joined the Royal Shakespeare Company after leaving RADA and has since appeared in many Shakespearean roles including Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*. Other theatre credits include *The Sea*, *Kean* and *Wild Oats*. She has also read the part of Titania in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for Naxos AudioBooks.

Cover picture: John Keats, illustration by J Severn.

Courtesy Mary Evans Picture Library

# The Great Poets

# John Keats

Read by **Samuel West** and **Michael Sheen**  
with **Simon Russell Beale** and **Sarah Woodward**

As a boy, John Keats was a passionate, possessive, even wilful character, as if he knew that, with just 25 years of lifespan, there was little time at his disposal. By the time of his death in 1821, he had written a body of poetry which proved a key contribution to the English Romantic movement, though this was scarcely recognised in his lifetime.

This general selection includes many of his finest poems, especially the Odes, including *Ode to Melancholy*, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, *Ode to a Nightingale* as well as more popular verse such as *Old Meg* and *There was a naughty boy*. The anthology ends with his longer narrative poem, *The Eve of St Agnes*.

CD ISBN:

978-962-634-489-7

View our catalogue online at  
[www.naxosaudiobooks.com](http://www.naxosaudiobooks.com)



ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. UNAUTHORISED PUBLIC PERFORMANCE,  
BROADCASTING AND COPYING OF THESE COMPACT DISCS PROHIBITED.  
© 2007 NAXOS Audiobooks Ltd. © 2007 NAXOS Audiobooks Ltd.  
Made in Germany.

Total time  
68:08