

SONGS FOR THE MERMAID TAVERN

Five Keats Settings for Voice and Piano

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John Keats was born in London in 1795 and died of tuberculosis in Rome in 1821, where he had gone to seek a better climate.

The poems chosen demonstrate the range of Keats' poetic talent, from the musings on life and love of "In Drear-nighted December" and "When I Have Fears" to the magic and mystery in his feline friend; from the silly doggerel of "Song About Myself", written for his sister, to the celebration of fellow poets in "Lines on the Mermaid Tavern", a famous drinking place in London, said to have been a favorite of Shakespeare.

SONGS FOR THE MERMAID TAVERN was composed in State College, Pennsylvania and New York City in January and February 2009.

In Drear-nighted December

In drear-nighted December,
Too happy, happy tree,
Thy branches ne'er remember
Their green felicity;
The north cannot undo them
With a sleety whistle through them;
Nor frozen thawings glue them
From budding at the prime.

In drear-nighted December,
Too happy, happy brook,
Thy bubblings ne'er remember
Apollo's summer look;
But with a sweet forgetting, \\\nThey stay their crystal fretting,
Never, never petting
About the frozen time.

Ah! would 'twere so with many
A gentle girl and boy!
But were there ever any
Writh'd not of passed joy?
The feel of not to feel it,
When there is none to heal it,
Nor numbed sense to steel it,
Was never said in rhyme.

Sonnet to a Cat

Cat! who hast pass'd thy grand climacteric,
How many mice and rats hast in thy days
Destroy'd? - How many tit bits stolen? Gaze
With those bright languid segments green, and prick
Those velvet ears - but prythee do not stick
Thy latent talons in me - and upraise
Thy gentle mew - and tell me all thy frays
Of fish and mice, and rats and tender chick.
Nay, look not down, nor lick thy dainty wrists -
For all the wheezy asthma, - and for all
Thy tail's tip is nick'd off - and though the fists
Of many a maid have given thee many a maul,
Still is that fur as soft as when the lists
In youth thou enter'dst on glass bottled wall.

When I Have Fears

When I have fears that I may cease to be
 Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain,
Before high-piled books, in charact'ry,
 Hold like rich garners the full ripen'd grain;
When I behold, upon the night's starr'd face,
 Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,
And think that I may never live to trace
 Their shadows, with the magic hand of chance;
And when I feel, fair creature of an hour!
 That I shall never look upon thee more,
Never have relish in the faery power
 Of unreflecting love! – then on the shore
Of the wide world I stand alone, and think
Till Love and Fame to nothingness do sink.

Song about Myself

1.

There was a naughty Boy,
A naughty boy was he,
He would not stop at
home,
He could not quiet be –
He took
In his Knapsack
A Book
Full of vowels
And a shirt
With some towels –
A slight cap
For night cap –
A hair brush,
Comb ditto,
New Stockings
For old ones
Would split O!
This Knapsack
Tight at his back
He rivetted close
And followed his Nose
To the North,
To the North,
And follow'ed his nose
To the North.

2.

There was a naughty boy
And a naughty boy was he,
For nothing would he do
But scribble poetry –
He took
An ink stand
In his hand
And a pen
Big as ten
In the other,
And away
In a Pother

He ran
To the mountains
And fountains
And ghostes
And Postes
And witches
And ditches
And wrote
In his coat
When the weather
Was cool,
Fear of gout,
And without
When the weather
Was warm –
Och the charm
When we choose
To follow one's nose
To the north,
To the north,
To follow one's nose
To the north!

3.

There was a naughty boy
And a naughty boy was he,
He kept little fishes
In washing tubs three
In spite
Of the might
Of the maid
Nor afraid
Of his Granny-good –
He often would
Hurly burly
Get up early
And go
By hook or crook
To the brook
And bring home
Miller's thumb,

Tittlebat
Not over fat,
Minnows small
As the stall
Of a glove,
Not above
The size
Of a nice
Little Baby's
Little fingers –
O he made
'Twas his trade
Of Fish a pretty Kettle
A Kettle
Of Fish a pretty Kettle
A Kettle!

4.

There was a naughty Boy,
And a naughty Boy was he,
He ran away to Scotland
The people for to see –
There he found
That the ground
Was as hard,
That a yard
Was as long,
That a song
Was as merry,
That a cherry
Was as red –
That lead
Was as weighty,
That fourscore
Was as eighty,
That a door
Was as wooden
As in England –
So he stood in his shoes
And he wonder'd,
He wonder'd,
He stood in his shoes
And he wonder'd.

Lines on the Mermaid Tavern

Souls of Poets dead and gone,
What Elysium have ye known,
Happy field or mossy cavern,
Choicer than the Mermaid Tavern?
Have ye tippled drink more fine
Than mine host's Canary wine?
Or are fruits of Paradise
Sweeter than those dainty pies
Of venison? O generous food!
Drest as though bold Robin Hood
Would, with his maid Marian,
Sup and bowse from horn and can.

I have heard that on a day
Mine host's signboard flew away,
Nobody knew whither, till
An astrologer's old quill
To a sheepskin gave the story,
Said he saw you in your glory,
Underneath a new old sign
Sipping beverage divine,
And pledging with contented smack
The Mermaid in the Zodiac.

Souls of Poets dead and gone,
What Elysium have ye known,
Happy field or mossy cavern,
Choicer than the Mermaid Tavern?