

# Ode To Autumn: Musical Musings on Life and Death in the Poetry of John Keats



## Summary:

Live reading of “Ode to Autumn” by John Keats, intertwined with music by Joseph Haydn, Ignaz Pleyel, Anton Reicha, and traditional folk songs

Music and readings performed by **Les Salonnières** -

Liane Sadler - Keyed-Flute

Sophie Longmuir - Violin

Mirjam-Luise Münzel - Violincello

## Programme:

**Carl Phillip Stamitz** (1746-1801)

Trio in G Major for fute, violin and violoncello

*III. Rondo, II. Andante*

ca. 15 Mins

Reading - “Ode to Autumn” by John Keats, 1819, first verse

**Joseph Haydn** (1732-1809)

Divertimento in G-Dur Hb. IV (1784)

*Allegro - Adagio - Allegro*

ca. 10 min

Reading - “Ode to Autumn,” second verse

## **Traditional**

The Last Rose of Summer - arranged by Charles Nicholson, 1821

Mac Donogh’s Lament

Neil Gow’s Lament for his Second Wife - Neil Gow, 1809

Reading - “Ode to Autumn,” third verse

**Anton Reicha** (1770-1836)

Grand Trio in G Major for flute, violin, and cello

*Adagio-Allegro*

ca. 15 mins

Total Length: ca. 53 minutes (including estimated timing of readings)

### Description:

John Keats was born in London 1795. Both his parents died when he was only a child, and he dedicated himself to studying literature, beginning to publish poetry at the age of 21. Having experienced the death of his father to an accident, and his mother and brother to tuberculosis, it is no surprise that the themes of life and death were often present in Keats' works.

"Ode to Autumn" uses the Romantic trope of comparing Autumn to the coming of death. But instead of lamenting death, he cleverly uses the metaphor to explore the beauty of maturation and the cyclic connection of death to life. Following the loss of his family, his contemplations are not only the result of Romantic expression, but also a personal expression. Shortly after composing this poem in 1819, Keats himself contracted tuberculosis and died just over a year later, aged only 25. This was his final poem, unknowingly written in his own life's Autumn.

Stamiz was a renowned violinist and composer in his time, travelled widely as a performer, and was the first composer to specify left-hand pizzicato for the violin. In the late 18th century he was very successful in London, contributing to the musical scene of England and no doubt to Keats' upbringing, with melodious and lively music.

In "Ode to Autumn," we are taken on a journey both through a day, and through a season. First comes the morning, and the beginning of Autumn. Here the summer is still ending, plants have finished ripening and are bursting with life, ready to be harvested, and bees are busily buzzing around the flowers. We are reminded of growth and the warmth of Summer, there is a feeling of excitement and energy. For Keats, maturation is a beautiful thing.

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,  
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;  
Conspiring with him how to load and bless  
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run;  
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,  
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;  
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells  
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,  
And still more, later flowers for the bees,  
Until they think warm days will never cease,  
For summer has o'er-brimm'd their clammy cells.

Haydn's music had swept across England since the 1780's, and his trip to London in the 1790's was immensely successful. His music was hungrily consumed and enjoyed by music lovers around the country. He left in 1795 - only months before Keats' birth, leaving behind a strong mark on English musical life. This trio in G major gives an uplifting and light atmosphere, and the piece brims with bubbly excitement and a lust for life, while reflecting the musical backdrop of Keats' time.

The second verse changes in mood, now more meditative. In the afternoon, and mid-Autumn, we are reminded of the slowing down of life in approaching death. A farmer rests and watches the harvest taking place, exhausted after hard labour in the fields. There is a recognition of the coming of death, the "last oozing hours by hours" of life as it draws to an end, and a sense of peace is knowing this.

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?  
Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find  
Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,  
Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;  
Or on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep,  
Drows'd with the fume of poppies, while thy hook  
Spares the next swath and all its twined flowers:  
And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep  
Steady thy laden head across a brook;  
Or by a cyder-press, with patient look,  
Thou watchest the last oozings hours by hours.

The folk songs, slow airs and lamentations, have a meditative quality to them. They give a sense of nostalgia, reflecting the farmer looking back at the field-workers as he rests, and the passing of time. In the early 19th century, folk songs from Scotland and Ireland became incredibly popular around Britain, and many arrangements were published, as well as complexly ornamented versions by virtuosos such as flutist Charles Nicholson. "The Last Rose of Summer" points to the ebbing away of the previous season. The song was extremely popular in the 1800's, and the original lyrics also speak of the summer fading away and the death that follows. Nicholson's complex ornamentations also ooze out every drop of nostalgia. "Moc Donough's Lamentation," an ancient traditional song, and "Neil Gow's Lament for his Second Wife," written in 1809, connect ancient and fresh lamentations for the dead, and reflect both the dark and sweet sides of nostalgia and grief, and the hold it can have over our minds.

Lastly, Keats awakens again the beauty of the cyclical nature of days, seasons, and life. The night approaches, so does winter - and also death. But if the night and the winter are on their way, that also means morning and Spring will follow... so what follows death? Life follows, and life goes on. Keats references the sounds that mark both Autumn and the evening time - bleating lambs, different insects and birds chirping into the night.

Where are the songs of spring? Ay, Where are they?  
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,—  
While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,  
And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;  
Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn  
Among the river shallows, borne aloft  
Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;  
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;  
Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft  
The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;  
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

Charming references to the songs of nature only strengthen a musical connection, allowing the pastoral calls in the Adagio and Allegro of Reicha's Grand Trio in G Major to truly take this verse and let it sing. This poem and this music are a recognition, celebration, and acceptance of death and its role in life itself.

### Ode to Autumn - John Keats

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