**TREASURE OF THE MONTH - NOVEMBER**

**A receipt for the hire of a piano loaned to John Keats and Joseph Severn for one month covering the end of November to the end of December 1820**

The original receipt for the hire of a piano for John Keats and Joseph Severn’s lodgings at 26 Piazza di Spagna could be one of the most easily overlooked items in the collection, but the piano played a very important part in the final months of Keats’ life. The receipt was presented to the museum by Severn’s daughter, Mrs. Eleanor Furneaux, in 1911 and may be seen on display in the Keats Room. The piano itself had been loaned to Keats and Severn for one month from the end of November to the end of December 1820; we know from Severn’s letters that they still had the piano after this date, but no other receipts remain in existence.

The receipt is written and signed by Anna Angeletti, the 43-year-old Venetian who owned and lived at 26 Piazza di Spagna and who rented out her spare rooms to foreigners staying in Rome, including, of course, Keats and Severn. Angeletti was a formidable woman whom Severn seems to have been a little intimidated by, as he unfavorably described her as an ‘old cat’.

When he and Keats arrived in Rome in mid-November 1820 to take up the lodgings sourced for them by the physician Dr James Clark, they were horrified to discover how much the rent was – over £4 a month. This was a sizeable sum, as in those days £50 per annum was the basic living wage, while £100-200 would provide a comfortable existence. Their apartment was, nevertheless, perfectly comfortable with lovely views overlooking the Piazza and Spanish Steps.

There is nothing particularly remarkable about the way the document looks, other than the fact that the ‘s’ is missing from the word ‘sette’ in the number 7 to denote the number of *scudi* paid. The *scudo* was the old currency used in Rome and the Papal States until 1866. The rental cost, 7 *scudi* a month, was a relatively marginal expense (about 28 shillings a month), and one that brought both Keats and Severn tremendous pleasure during an otherwise very dark period.

Shortly after their arrival in Rome, Keats had asked Severn to find a piano, ‘for not only was he passionately fond of music’, Severn later recalled, ‘but he found that his constant pain and o’er fretted nerves were much sooth’d by it’. Over the coming weeks Keats’ health declined, which eventually disabled him from engaging in many of the activities that Dr. Clark had prescribed in order to distract him from his illness, such as horse-riding and walking on the Pincian Hill. On the 30th November 1820, the day after the date on the receipt of the piano, Keats wrote to his friend Charles Brown saying ‘Tis the most difficult thing in the world to me to write a letter. My stomach feels so bad that I feel it worse on opening any book’. As even reading and writing became increasingly taxing, we can only imagine the pleasure that Keats would have gained from hearing Severn play. Since Keats was not well enough to continue writing poetry, listening to Severn must have provided a much-needed artistic release for Keats, as well as keeping his mind off his illness and rousing his spirits.

Severn played Keats arrangements of Haydn symphonies, kindly borrowed from Dr. Clark, and the poet would exclaim delightedly that Haydn was ‘like a child, for there is no knowing what he will do next’. From these words we might deduce that Severn may have played Keats a selection from the twelve so-called *London symphonies* that the Austrian composer had written in the 1790s during two extended stays in London; and more specifically his ‘Symphony No. 94’ in G major, which is often known as the ‘Surprise Symphony’, because of its sudden fortissimo explosion amidst an otherwise hushed, slow movement.

When the contents of Keats’ bedroom were burned after his death, the sitting room escaped the same fate, Severn said, ‘mainly on account of the hired pianoforte, which I refused to be allowed to be touched; and as in connection with my protesting guardianship of it I was able to prove that I had never carried my dying friend into the room, it followed that nothing else therein could be touched’. So, the piano itself managed to escape the fate bestowed upon many Keats-related items that were in the house, which were destroyed after his death for the fear of the spread of the tuberculosis infection.

This receipt is a particularly fascinating artifact because discovering such items can instantly give us a visceral, emotional connection with the past. While objects of this kind might not contain the palpable emotions of a letter or a journal, they do transport us to a specific time and place, and in doing so, open up a wealth of emotions and experiences, and in this case, the receipt prompts us to think of the moments of respite from pain and suffering that Keats experienced on hearing his companion play for him.

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