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Charles Dickens

A PORTRAIT IN LETTERS

Compiled and introduced by **David Timson**

Read by **Simon Callow**

1	Charles Dickens: A Portrait in Letters	1:29
2	Dickens and Friends	7:56
3	In 1851, Macready took early retirement...	5:28
4	Dickens's closest lifelong friend...	9:24
5	In 1857, Collins and Dickens went on a spree...	6:42
6	Dickens and Work	8:10
7	Dickens took it upon himself to oversee...	6:41
8	Likewise, Dickens could be charming...	8:04
9	Dickens and Travel	0:42
10	Eager to explore Italy...	9:51
11	In the next letter, to one of his oldest...	8:13
12	In November 1844, Dickens had paid a visit...	8:59
13	Dickens found himself overwhelmed...	7:18
14	Dickens soon began to despise...	7:00
15	To Mr Thomas Mitton	4:35
16	Dickens's travels over the length...	8:26
17	Dickens and Causes	4:49
18	Dickens met the great philanthropist Angela...	5:26

19	The scheme met with considerable success.	6:45
20	Dickens and the Theatre	8:43
21	The energy expounded by Dickens...	6:48
22	To Miss Mamey Dickens	7:47
23	Dickens and Love	4:56
24	But Maria was not going to let her beau off...	7:42
25	Whilst in Paris Dickens received...	6:16
26	Now fully in the grip once again...	5:10
27	Back In 1835, still smarting...	8:44
28	Dickens's relationship...	7:48
29	Dickens and Domestic Life	6:44
30	In 1860, in his annual letter...	8:21
31	Dickens seems to have eventually found...	4:12
32	Dickens the Man	7:28
33	As in politics so in his religious faith...	9:39
34	To Mrs Hulkes	6:52
35	The impression we get of Charles Dickens...	8:06

Total time: 4:10:00

Charles Dickens

(1812–1870)

A PORTRAIT IN LETTERS

Dickens seems to have had an aversion to posterity. He stipulated in his will that there were to be no statues or memorials to commemorate him, loathed having his photograph taken, and, if he could, would have had every letter he had sent to friends and colleagues burnt.

In 1860 he had a huge bonfire of letters that had been sent to him:

'They sent up a smoke like the genie when he got out of the casket on the seashore; and as it was an exquisite day when I began, and rained very heavily when I finished, I suspect my correspondence of having overcast the face of the Heavens,' he wrote to his business manager W. H. Wills, and was reported as saying: *'Would to God every letter I had ever written was on that pile.'*

Fortunately for posterity – it being part of human nature to treasure letters connected with the famous – his friends did not destroy his, though he urged them to do so, and in all there are approximately 14,000 letters extant. He was an inveterate letter-writer, taking every opportunity to contact even mere acquaintances with a friendly note, or to indulge in lengthy missives full of description and opinion to his closer circle of friends, as well as sending lists of business instructions to the hard-pressed editor of *Household Words*, Wills. Writing was as natural as breathing to Dickens. He wrote his letters, and his novels, with a quill pen, expressing at times exasperation with the new-fangled steel nibs, and had a penchant for writing in blue ink on blue paper. His signature with its famous flourish was almost the equivalent of a modern brand logo, and it was emblazoned in gold leaf on the covers

of some of the early collected editions of his works. The recipients of his letters expected to see it, and he self-consciously apologised when he didn't feel up to executing it.

But what was Dickens afraid his letters would reveal to posterity? Was he concerned that too much of his personal life and intimate thoughts, intended only for the correspondent, would become public property and cheapen his reputation?

Whatever the reason, he destroyed every letter he received as a matter of course after 1860, writing with relief: 'and my mind is, so far, at ease.'

It is difficult to know just how close we get to the real Dickens in his letters.

He was always such a self-conscious showman that you can never be sure that he isn't presenting a carefully composed image of the true Dickens for his friends and colleagues. Sometimes he presents himself almost as one of his own characters, which begs the question of whether there isn't always an element of fiction in his letters. He is often playful, comical, and constantly seeking to

entertain his friends in these letters with vivid descriptions of foreign countries and unusual people with whom he comes into contact.

Not only in his letters, but in life, Dickens loved to assume a character behind which he could hide his true personality. He constantly invented nicknames for himself such as 'The Inimitable', which he had been called at school, or 'The Sparkler of Albion'; to his employees he was 'The Chief'; and for the amusement of his children one Christmas, he became 'the Unparalleled Necromancer RHIA RHAMA RHOOS.' More seriously, when he began his affair with Ellen Ternan, he assumed the name of 'Mr Tringham' so that he could pay the rent on his and Ellen's country retreat without detection.

The most public alternative identity he created for himself was of course the pen name 'Boz.' As a struggling young writer he seems to have desired anonymity, until the success of *Oliver Twist* in 1838 confirmed the talent he had displayed in *The Pickwick Papers*, and he could safely reveal to the world his true

identity. Dickens lacked self-confidence as a young man, and all his life he was afraid of failing. This was the effect on his personality of years of neglect as a child, when he was forced to work in a blacking factory to support his feckless family. Having experienced poverty at first hand, he wasn't going to let 'Charles Dickens' return to its deprivations. If 'Boz' had failed, 'Dickens' would still be intact to try again. His success as 'Boz' however, considerably reduced the possibility of failing as Charles Dickens.

What did Dickens's family and friends think about his letters? Georgina Hogarth, his sister-in-law and stalwart supporter, thought his letters expressed Dickens's 'individuality' with which his son Henry Dickens concurred, saying in his memoir of his father that the letters testify to the enjoyment Dickens got out of life. Dickens's great friend Forster went so far as to say the letters were themselves 'literature' and admired their freshness of style. It is unfortunate therefore that Forster thought it necessary to destroy so many of Dickens's letters when writing his biography. As one of Dickens's principal

correspondents he received hundreds during their long and close friendship, but compiled his biography of Dickens on a cut-and-paste system, literally cutting out the passages he required and then destroying the rest. He also felt free to re-write and edit the letters so the few examples we have in his biography may or may not represent what Dickens wrote.

Dickens's daughter Kate was the first to question whether the *true* Dickens was revealed in the letters. Speaking of the letters he wrote to her mother in the 1830s, she wrote:

Dickens heart and soul are not in these letters but some of his Sunday clothes are; and then...there may be other letters, in which the real man is revealed, minus his Sunday clothes, and all shams, and with his heart and soul burning like jewels in a dark place.

The 'dark places' where we do come closer to the real man are to be found in the letters that are concerned with the causes close to his heart: literary copyright, capital

punishment, the home for fallen women he set up with the philanthropist Angela Burdett-Coutts. We also get a taste of his renowned and ruthless efficiency in the glimpses we get of the letters regarding his amateur theatrical activities, as well as the hard schedule he always set for himself during the writing of a novel. But even with the vast number of letters extant, the moments of self-revelation are rare, and perhaps ultimately we learn more of him in his novels, which may be why he wanted his letters destroyed – he felt he had expressed his true self in his fiction. His books were his memorial.

Notes by David Timson



Simon Callow is one of Britain's best-loved actors, known for *Four Weddings and a Funeral* on film; *Amadeus* in the theatre and countless other roles on TV, film and in the theatre. He regularly directs for the stage and is an acclaimed author – his biography of Charles Dickens was highly praised in 2012. Known for his outstanding tour de force one-man shows, Simon has toured internationally in *Being Shakespeare* and two programmes of Dickens.



David Timson has made over 1,000 broadcasts for BBC Radio Drama. For Naxos AudioBooks he wrote *The History of Theatre*, which won an award for most original production from the Spoken Word Publishers Association in 2001. He has also directed five Shakespeare plays for Naxos AudioBooks, including *King Richard III* (with Kenneth Branagh), which won Best Drama award from the SWPA in 2001. In 2002 he won the Audio of the Year award for his reading of *A Study in Scarlet*. He has read the entire *Sherlock Holmes* canon for Naxos AudioBooks.

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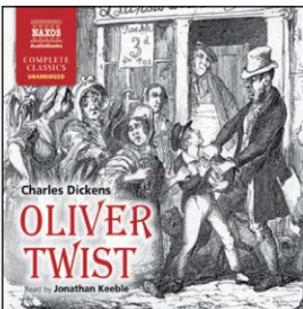
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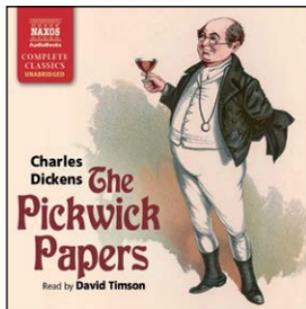
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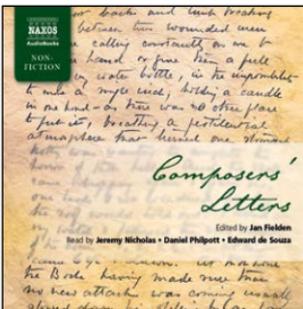
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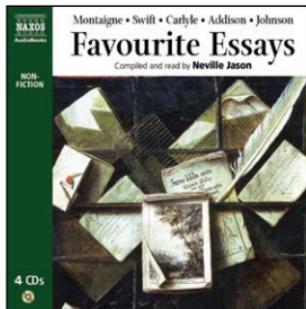
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Charles Dickens

A PORTRAIT IN LETTERS

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Those who only know Charles Dickens from his novels will be fascinated to discover the private and personal Dickens in this selection of his letters. His sister-in-law Georgina Hogarth thought they expressed his individuality; his friend Forster thought them literature. They give us a portrait of a complex man with so many different facets to his personality, ranging from the serious, when discussing social issues, to the outrageously humorous when writing merely to entertain his many friends. 200 years after his birth he still enlightens and entertains us.



Simon Callow is one of Britain's best-loved actors, known for *Four Weddings and a Funeral* on film; *Amadeus* in the theatre and countless other roles on TV, film and in the theatre. He regularly directs for the stage and is an acclaimed author – his biography of Charles Dickens was highly praised in 2012. Known for his outstanding tour de force one-man shows, Simon has toured internationally in *Being Shakespeare* and two programmes of Dickens.

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