



Piano activism

Music has the unique capacity to bring people together and prompt collective action, says pianist **Sarah Nicolls**, whose touring project *12 Years* uses a modified grand piano to raise awareness of climate change

My project *12 Years* was inspired by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's special report in 2018. Written by scientists from all over the planet, it said we only had 12 years to halve our global emissions of carbon dioxide to keep global temperatures to a 1.5-degree temperature rise above the pre-industrial baseline. I read this and took the stark deadline to the world very seriously. My son would turn 18 in 2030. What news was I going to give him, in the year he grew into an adult?

I realised I needed to do something more than sign petitions, so I decided to bring this into my artistic work by creating a piano recital about climate change. Music has the capacity to bring us together, to move us collectively, and the concert hall is a precious place where politics and beliefs can be left at the door. The arts can offer a precious neutrality while also being committed, passionate and transformative. This thought gave me hope that I might be doing the right thing by creating *12 Years*.

I soon realised I had set myself a challenge. What would it sound like? How should I go about balancing the specific (words) with the abstract (music)? I found inspiration in Hans Christian Andersen's famous quote, which I have pinned to my studio wall: 'Where words fail, music speaks.' So I set off to dovetail both, to say something concrete as well as exploring the enormity of the topic from a human perspective: what does the climate crisis *feel* like?

I began with recent climate change headlines about species extinctions, extreme weather events and ocean acidification, etc, as well as my own incredulity at how humanity – every person on the entire planet – can reverse our behaviour in just 12 years. I referenced an interview with David Wallace-Wells, author of *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming*, and took extracts from a panel discussion at COP24 (Conference of the Parties). Then I realised we needed some characters, people, to care about: a story, some humour even!

Some fictional characters entered my head while trying to grapple with another article I'd read in 2018, about luxury bunkers being sold to people to survive the apocalypse. I could see there were many different reactions to the pummeling headlines and was intrigued by those with wildly different responses from mine. Yet I also wanted to avoid being preachy: everyone's response is valid and change won't come from moralising.

The format I finally hit on is a series of phone conversations juxtaposed with music. We hear one side – their side – of the story, while an unheard respondent (their sister) chastises them for environmentally unfriendly behaviour. The tracks began taking shape and the trajectory of the characters developed, culminating in Greta Thunberg's speeches and the forceful idea that the only way to find hope is through action.

All of the music for *12 Years* has been composed by me on my Inside-Out Piano. This is a piano I've designed and had built, based on a straight-strung 1900 Erard. The result is unique yet very similar to historic giraffe and cabinet pianos. It's basically a grand piano with the strings placed vertically, at 90 degrees to the keys. A new back-striking action allows me to play the keyboard normally, but I can also play the strings directly – producing harmonics and many other sounds by plucking, strumming, striking and knocking.

I developed each track for *12 Years* based on where it appears in the story. In every case, I have sought to find the right atmosphere and sounds, sometimes creating music then identifying the best place for it to fit. Many