



SCREEN AUSTRALIA & SCREEN TASMANIA PRESENTS

# THE PIANO TUNER

*pianos like people, need a good life*

WRITTEN & DIRECTED BY **NATALIA LASKA** PRODUCED BY **JULIA OVERTON & TOM ZUBRYCKI** ORIGINAL MUSIC BY **MARTIN TUCKER**  
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From a tiny island at the bottom of the world, piano tuner Martin Tucker is on a mission to save the musical instrument and a way of life.

When pianos die, the piano tuner will follow, but Martin refuses to give up. To rescue instruments and himself from redundancy, he transforms into a rough travelling piano tuner. From Tasmania to the Northern Territory, Martin traverses the harsh Australian environment, one that is challenging for humans and even more so for pianos. Martin will create his own musical art of survival.

The film follows Tasmanian Martin over an eight-year period as he carries out his full-time job as 'the piano doctor' and navigates a professional existential crisis. Once upon a time, Australia was home to the largest number of pianos in the world, but now acoustic instruments are falling out of fashion, replaced by electric keyboards, modern forms of entertainment and the permanent shortage of time to practice. To prevent pianos from ending up on the street or the tip, Martin creates the piano orphanage - a space for unwanted pianos, where they can safely wait for better times to come. Martin and his friend, piano removalist Tony Gamble, collect old pianos and pianolas in a desperate attempt to save them from destruction. The piano orphanage in Tony's garage grows out of control, with no idea what to do next. Pianos spill into Martin's house, and Tony's donkey farm outside Hobart.



The film's characters are piano people who live in a world that is rapidly changing or vanishing. The old, heavy instrument, which needs space, maintenance, tuning, and the discipline of practising, doesn't fit into modern life, where a lack of financial certainty pushes people to live light and mobile. There is also an influx of electric keyboards that require no tuning.



**Martin** comes up with the idea of migrating as birds do, searching for new habitats. To expand his workspace, he will go as far as the Australian continent allows. He becomes a nomadic piano tuner and embarks on an odyssey from Tasmania to the Northern Territory, chasing the cycle of life of both pianos and people.

When travelling, he goes to the heart of the Australian outback, where pianos are covered in layers of dust, often inhabited by lizards, mice and cockroaches. In the North Territory, the weather changes from the dry season, which makes pianos sound tinny,

to the wet season, when they can just stop working. Martin borrows from Peter to pay Paul, improvising with piano parts and tools, often making them as they are not available on Bunnings shelves. He will sleep rough in a makeshift bed or in a swag on the back of his Ute. He would do anything to reach out to new clients and pianos, and as a result, he goes where other piano tuners won't.



There is a bonus in Darwin, with so many Asian immigrants attracted to job opportunities and proximity to Asia. These immigrants, even if not wealthy, would save up to buy brand-new shiny pianos. They are ambitious for their children and determined that they will become pianists; they will make them practice hard.

The documentary is a window into the lives of a diverse group of piano lovers. Rich and poor, old and young, happy or depressed, Anglo-Saxon, Asian or Indigenous - they all love pianos. The film records a unique and rich cultural history within Australia. What is behind Martin's determination? Is it a fear of unemployment and irrelevance, or is it a statement that the language of music can bridge cultural differences? In the world of AI content, The Piano Tuner story takes us to real people to test our most precious human-to-human connection, enhanced by music.



This observational-style film portrays a vanishing community, that of Australian piano people. Those who play acoustic pianos very well or badly, and those who own them for sentimental or status reasons.

#### DIRECTOR STATEMENT

As a fresh newcomer to Australia, I had the extraordinary opportunity to knock on doors and be invited into the wide and wild spectrum of Australians. Those clients of Martin Tucker were happy to talk about their domestic music, miles away from concert halls, money, and the music industry, and therefore not contaminated by commerce, but close to people's hearts and minds. My guide, the piano tuner, grabbed my

attention as he talked about pianos as if they were people; he would say, "They need a good childhood, or they age badly without exercise; the more they are played, the longer they stay alive." I see it as a metaphor that resonates with humans'

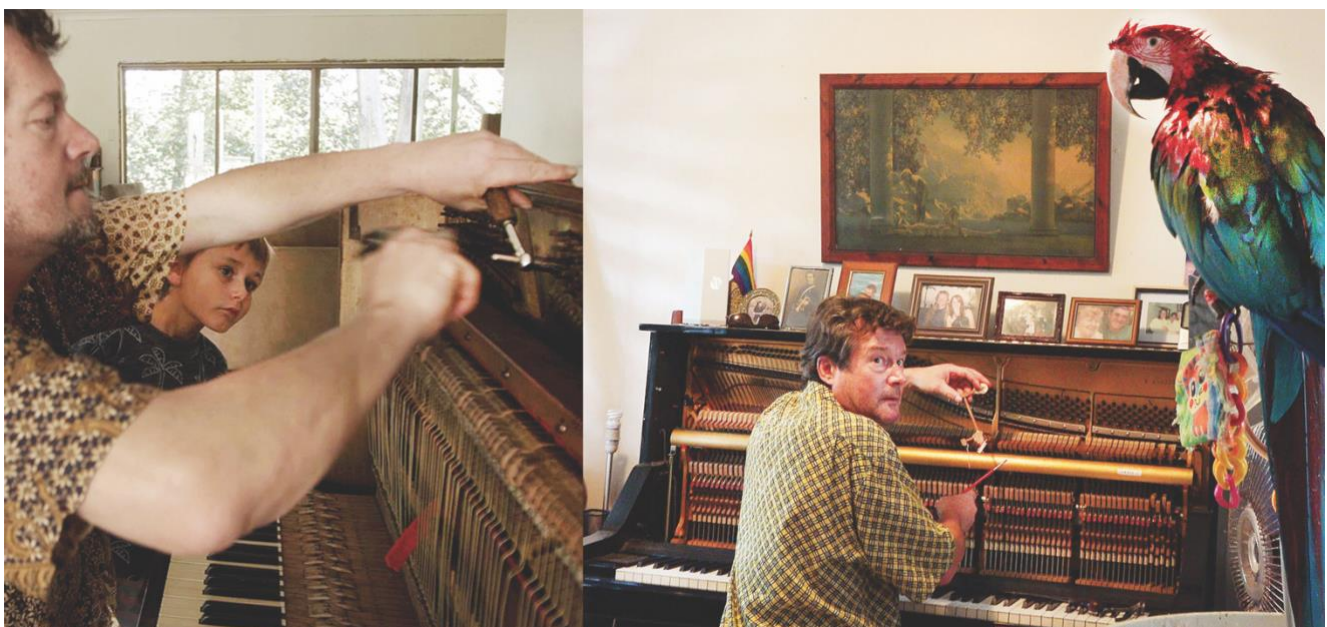
craving to 'play' or stay alive as long as possible and 'in tune' with itself. Also, like pianos, people have a lifetime. So many of the film characters are no longer with us... But their message about the importance of music still resonates in the film. Miss Leila Wills, retired teacher, one of Martin's clients, said that the reason music is vanishing from the school's curriculum is that we can't test it. We can test math, we can measure sports achievements, but we can't test our musicality. Music is abstract, and that's why it's fun and lives untamed inside us.

My film shows the effects of music on people as we follow the life events of the piano doctor, who is 'cleaning the sound', equipped with basic tools: his ears and a tuning lever.



## THE PIANO TUNER

**M**artin Tucker fell in love with the piano as a child and has been playing ever since he can remember. The Tucker family left England for Tasmania when Martin was six. There are cassettes with recordings of small Martin playing piano. Martin's first piano brand was named 'Tucker'. Ironically, it was a very poor-quality piano. Perhaps this is how he learned to hear what the bad piano sounds like... When Martin was 15, his father gave him a book, 'How To Tune The Piano'. Martin carried it with him everywhere. The book helped him in his first job at the second-hand music shop "Ye Olde Music Shoppe" in Hobart, where he repaired old pianos and dusty furniture. This is when Martin decided to do the proper piano tuning course. Martin went to Sydney for a year of training, run by Yamaha, under the tutelage of Armenian concert technician, master Ara Vartoukian. Six days a week of practice, and the first toolbox with a tuning lever and regulating screwdrivers. Finally, with his diploma, Martin was ready to set out on his profession, passionately believing that pianos can live forever. For almost 40 years, Martin has made his living by tuning by ear and meticulously repairing acoustic pianos. He also perfected the art of breaching the strict, business-oriented work model by incorporating social activities.



## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The piano had a cult-like status in colonial Australia. Transported by camel, bullock and horse to all known areas of the Australian terrain. It was estimated that around 700,000 pianos had been imported to Australia by 1888, making it home to one of the highest per capita numbers of pianos in the world.

Australia had its own piano makers – the Irish-born philanthropist Octavius Beale, who arrived in Hobart in 1854, and the German-born merchant Hugo Wertheim, who arrived in Melbourne in 1875. Both became importers of sawing machines and other household items sought by the growing population of the British colony in the Pacific.

Beale and Wertheim were competitors but remained friends, before and after establishing their own piano factories to serve the local market. Beale built what was to become the biggest piano factory in the British Empire, finally closing its doors in Sydney's inner west in 1975. Wertheim opened his piano factory in Melbourne's Richmond and employed over 400 people before the factory became a victim of the 1930s depression, closing in 1935. The site later became the studios of broadcaster Channel Nine. Beale and Wertheim pianos are still alive in Australian homes, maintained by generations of piano technicians. Wertheim is still an Australian-owned company, but its pianos are produced in China and South Korea. The booming demand for pianos among Asian immigrants has driven an unexpected revival of Australia's piano industry. China's number one music retailer opened a store in the Sydney suburb of Chatswood, where 34% of the population has Chinese ancestry.



## FILM CHARACTERS

**Tony Gamble** is a piano removalist and an ex-coal miner from New Zealand, a self-made man who, in order to avoid retirement, bought himself a truck to move pianos for people.

Tony opens every day with a new business idea. He owns an unfinished motel, a hobby farm with donkeys, roosters and emus, and makes toys from old piano keys. The duo of Martin and Tony represents a practical madness, combined with a business model that fuels the mission to save pianos.



**Wayne Garth** used to service player pianos until, around 60's television in Australia finally sealed their fate. To make ends meet, he managed checkouts at a supermarket in Hobart.

Perhaps born in the wrong place and time, Wayne laments the end of the piano era, as well as the loss of musical instrument quality and discipline in life. He surrounds himself with pianos and Titanic memorabilia in his tiny Hobart home. The relationship between Martin and Wayne emphasises the team effort in the struggle against the zeitgeist.

Artist **Gay Hawkes** lost her home and her beloved piano in the 2013 firestorm, which burned the Tasmanian town of Dunalley. She has struggled to rebuild her life and uses music to deal with her trauma. In the film, we see how Martin finds and restores a fine old piano for her. Piano music not only enhances psychological well-being but also bonds the two as friends. Again, Martin is more than a tuner.



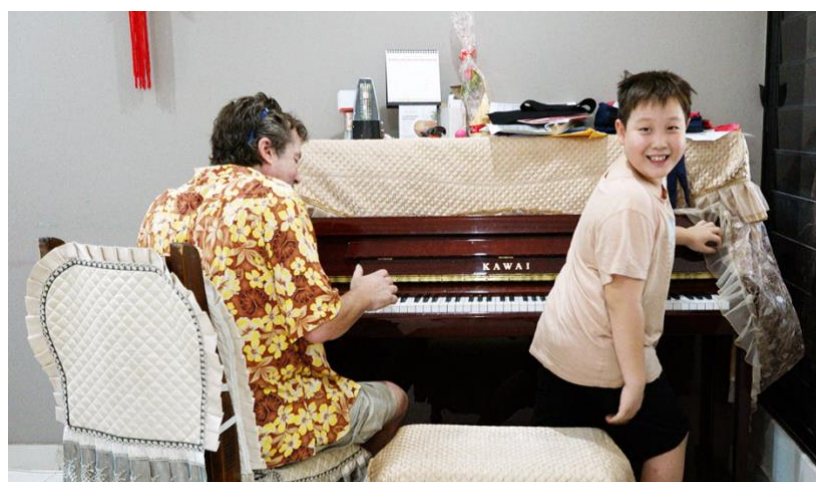
**Neville Rodman**, a motor mechanic, owner of the 'Skyline' petrol station in South Hobart, bartered his piano tuning for servicing Martin's car. Neville plays his old Canadian piano a few times a week as it finds a place in the corner of his mechanic's workshop. "The sound of E flat is, for me, a kind of cathedral sound, close to nature, it's spiritual," says Neville. Neville complains about modernity's obsession with the NEW. Together with Martin, they discuss the philosophical aspect of piano culture and its long-lasting effect on humanity.

**Bethany and Gregory McCallum**, and their nine children, are an Amish family. They live without electricity and modern infrastructure on a small farm in northeast Tasmania, and their piano is the heart of home entertainment. Martin says a visit to the Amish is like a time travel to an époque when the piano in Australia was 'a household orchestra and god'.



**Scott Trenwith.** a music teacher in Darwin with a severe hearing impairment, but for some reason, he prefers the soft sound of a harpsichord to that of a piano. With Martin's help, the painstaking restoration of the delicate instrument shifts into a two-man mission to strengthen it to withstand the high humidity of Darwin's tropical climate. Scott connects traditional European music with Darwin culture and, at the end of the restoration, delivers a special harpsichord concert for his community.

**Mary Greenwood.** a retired nurse and the widow of Chinese descent. She shares her solitude with an old piano, a precious gift from her deceased husband. Martin repairs the instrument, which other piano tuners have described as a lost cause. He plays for Mary and consoles her, soothing her fears of dying far from her ancestral country. Mary represents the voice of many immigrants who use music as a language of emotions otherwise hard to describe, particularly in a new country with a foreign culture.



**Qinfang Chen**, the Chinese cleaning lady. As a 19-year-old girl, she attended The Bible School in Shanghai and learnt to read music and play piano for a church ceremony. Qinfang emphasised that she is the first one in generations of her family to be able to have piano lessons: ‘We were too poor to own the piano. After emigrating to Darwin, 14 years ago, Qinfang managed to establish a family with two kids, and buy her first house and her first piano. Martin assists with the arrival of the second piano, \$15,000 Yamaha. It’s for Qinfang’s daughter, Yufan.

**Mina Dong**, a businesswoman from Harbin, the Northern province of China. Mina supplies the Darwin building industry with granite and marble bench tops. Mina can’t play piano by herself, but her dream was that her first daughter would. After 14 years of living in Darwin, all the kids of Mina: Jessica, Joanna, and George are piano enthusiasts and piano students, competing to see who plays better. The family piano, with its special cover reminding a wedding dress, is an object of everybody’s worship. We see Martin at work, tuning the piano, under the supervision of the Chinese grandma, Lijuan Li (non-English speaker). Mina takes Martin to the newly finished villa, to show him the room for the future Yamaha grand piano and to assess the acoustics of the space.

**Kirra Voller**, a singer, political activist and proud Wirangu/Kokatha woman. She calls Martin to share the news that she obtained for free, a real, acoustic piano, and she is thrilled because she never thought she would be able to have one of those... Martin is needed to do a serious repair and tuning. Kirra is not going to learn the real cost of the service. Martin just wants her to have the piano and offers some tips to Kirra, who is a self-taught piano beginner. Kirra’s house feels like a beehive buzzing with her four children, including an infant baby girl, Indigo, whom Martin asks to hold in his arms. Later in the night, Martin goes to the local bar to hear Kirra singing her iconic song 'The Boss Bitch'.



**Gabriel Forteza**, 13 years old, self-taught pianist who learned to play on a broken keyboard, back in Manila, his parents' hometown. Martin meets Gabriel at the Middle School in Palmerston, where the boy is practicing on the donated baby grand piano. Martin cries, overwhelmed with emotions, when Gabriel plays Debussy's 'Clair de Lune'. Gabriel explains that his parents can't afford either the piano or the piano lessons.

**Jeff Barrett**, used to teach music in the Darwin prison. Now Jeff spends his retirement in the sole company of his old Beale piano. Jeff lives off-grid in an old bus, miles away from civilisation, close to Litchfield National Park, surrounded by magnetic termite mounds. Only Martin agrees to travel that far to service Jeff's old piano. While working on the delapidated instrument, Martin will hear stories about sharing this makeshift shelter with poisonous snakes, but also enjoy some of the beautiful songs composed by Jeff in the middle of nowhere.

**Bess and Sonya Hart** are from a small cattle farm outside Katherine. They offer a testimony to Australian 'outback culture, which gained a lot from pianos, which managed to provide generations with an important sense of 'high culture' expressed by local folk music. Sonya, a hardworking cowgirl, sings traditional songs for Martin, assuring him that they all tell important stories about the way of life people used and still do in NT, despite ongoing droughts and the hardships that follow.



## PIANO PLAYING IN AUSTRALIA

Statistics (Australia Council Arts Facts) show that Australians agree that playing an instrument is fun or a good way to express themselves, and a way to gain a sense of accomplishment. 20 per cent of children learn to play music, whilst 70 per cent of adults wish they had learned. Increasingly, parents are seeking an alternative to their children spending less time online and being glued to computer games. More than 80 per cent of Australians believe our society is becoming a lonelier place, according to survey results released today by Lifeline Australia. Figures show we spend an average of 50 hours of our weekly downtime looking at our TVs and digital devices. **The Piano Tuner** provides a solution for these societal problems. It can get young people and others engaged in learning and playing the piano. The piano connects generations, as older people can share their piano talents as well. This sense of intergenerational bonding is highlighted at Rigby's home in Malmsbury, Victoria, as the film shows. Their Beale piano has been in their family for three generations.

**This film can change the way Australians think about their culture by recognising its strong foundation in the art of piano-making and playing. As long as we play pianos, we stay connected, creative and strong.**



## PRODUCERS

**Julia Overton** is an experienced film industry professional. A practitioner in narrative and documentary storytelling and in the areas of children's filmmaking, animation, TV drama and news and current affairs. She has worked in key decision-making areas in federal and state funding bodies in Australia and New Zealand. She specialised in documentary during her time at Screen Australia. Her experience in the industry's international production and market sectors has led to strong, enduring contacts. Julia started in drama production in the UK, followed by a stint in News, Current Affairs and Documentary at CBC Canada. In Australia she worked with the Australian Film Television & Radio School before turning to producing and then working with the screen agencies. She has acted as Executive Producer, Producer or Mentor on numerous films and acts as consultant for New Zealand Film Commission, Screen Territory and Screen West, has been on the board of Australian International Documentary Conference, Input Public Television Event and Wide Angle Tasmania. In 2012 she was the recipient of the Stanley Hawes Award in recognition of her contribution to Australian documentary.

**Tom Zubrycki** has been making documentaries for over 45 years. He has won many awards for his directing work and also for his mentorship on behalf of the industry. As producer and executive producer he has worked with both experienced and new and emerging directors. Recent films include FAIR GAME (2017), UNDERMINED – TALES OF THE KIMBERLEY (2018), ABLAZE (2021), KINDRED (2023) MEMORY FILM – a filmmaker’s diary (2023). His latest film as director SENSES OF CINEMA (2022) is a collaboration with Melbourne filmmaker John Hughes. Tom is a recipient of the prestigious Stanley Hawes Award, and has actively championed the cause of the documentary sector over a number of years. More information on his website. [www.tomzubrycki.com](http://www.tomzubrycki.com)

#### WRITER, DIRECTOR

**Natalia Laska** has over twenty years of experience in journalism, specialising in social reportage and photography. In Poland, she published in weekly newspapers such as Polityka, Newsweek, Magazyn (Gazeta Wyborcza), Elle, and Playboy, as well as in German publications Frauenrat, Tazz, and Polen+. Her work was published in numerous travel journals. She worked for several TV talk shows on Polish public and private television stations. Among other projects, she curated a Polish-German media project ‘Bauhaus Movement in Israel’ in 2001 and the video project based on the archives of Simon Laks, a composer and the Auschwitz Orchestra Conductor, in 2013 in Paris, France. Also, she co-directed The New World Manifesto – a video series documenting the lives of American political activists and their pilgrimage to ‘Burning Man Festival’, Nevada, USA, 2012. Natalia’s first documentary in Australia - ‘Sweet Running Machines’ - premiered at BOFA Festival 2015 in Launceston. Her short documentary ‘The Piano Tuner’ was broadcast on ABC Compass. She has a bachelor’s degree in justice studies (University of Tasmania) and (in progress) a Master of Arts in Indigenous Research (Charles Darwin University). Currently, she is based ‘one foot’ in Darwin, NT, Australia and ‘the other foot’ in Tasmania.

#### EDITOR, CO-WRITER

**Fiona Strain ASE** is a freelance Film Editor whose current focus is on documentary. Her work has been recognised with four nominations and one ‘Ellie’ Award from the

Australian Screen Editors' Guild (ASE). Her Editing work has been awarded in the European Cinematography Awards (ECA) and nominated in the Australian Academy of Cinema and Television Arts (AACTA) Awards. Films she has worked on have screened on most major platforms and festivals, achieving success in the wider industry - including: Best Documentary Series in the Australian Film Institute Awards (now AACTA), Best Children's Series (AFI), Best Science Film in the Australian ATOM Awards, the People's Choice Awards at the 'If' Awards. Fiona has been active in the editing community through the Australian Screen Editors' Guild. She has received ASE Accreditation, served as Vice President on three occasions and was President of the ASE for five years.

The Piano Tuner

The documentary film (90min)

## **PRODUCTION CREDITS**

Written and Directed by

Natalia Laska

Producers

Julia Overton & Tom Zubrycki

Editor, co-writer

Fiona Strain (ASE)

Cinematography by

Natalia Laska

Original Music

Martin Tucker

Sound Design & Mix

Michael Gissing

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## The Piano Tuner | CONTACT INFORMATION

**Website** <https://www.thepianotuner.film>

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