

In a dozen somber, elegiac pieces for piano and electronics recorded in the wake of a cancer diagnosis, the Japanese composer Ryuichi Sakamoto reckons with his own mortality.

In 2014, a medical diagnosis changed Ryuichi Sakamoto's life. The pianist, composer, and Yellow Magic Orchestra member was told that he'd contracted throat cancer, forcing him to reluctantly cancel live performances while he underwent treatment. "I honestly don't know how many years I have left," he would later reflect in the 2017 documentary *Ryuichi Sakamoto: Coda*. "I'm not taking anything for granted. But I know that I want to make more music. Music that I won't be ashamed to leave behind—meaningful work."

This sense of renewed ambition led Sakamoto to abandon an album he was then recording and begin anew with *async*, a somber, introspective release informed by his cancer diagnosis. The 14-track album channeled the melancholy reverence of Bach along with the films of Andrei Tarkovsky, situating sparse piano pieces within electronic soundscapes imbued with a sobering weight.

Nearly a decade removed from his initial diagnosis and more than five years on from *async*, Sakamoto has continued making music, even as his battle with cancer persists. His latest album, *12*, was written and recorded during the course of an especially difficult 13 months.

After being diagnosed with rectal cancer at the height of the pandemic—"From now on, I will be living alongside cancer," he announced—Sakamoto retreated from public life, and the disease escalated to stage four in 2022. Nevertheless, he began hosting occasional instrumental livestreams as part of his "Playing the Piano" series, for which he performed career-spanning material in short takes that were edited together into virtual concerts.

Following his 2020 and 2022 livestreams—the former was later released as a live album—*12* wades further into the emotional landscapes that defined *async*.

A collection of ambient etudes for piano and synthesizer, the album is strikingly minimal in its arrangements. Tracks are titled and sequenced in the order in which they were committed to tape, lending the album a diaristic feel. (Only the final cut, an atmospheric, minute-long recording of tinkling bells, is presented out of order.) The pieces move softly through space and time, emphasizing the reverberant textures of the room in which they were recorded.

"20210310" opens with a bristling synth tone that grows and expands slowly, alternating between high and low notes that brush up against the thresholds of human hearing in each direction. The piece rises and falls with a clear contrapuntal arc that never resolves into a melody. Others, like "20220202" and "20220214," are similarly

atmospheric, made up of raw, unvarnished sounds; they feel more like demos than the focused interventions of Sakamoto's past solo records.

In addition to the weight of the room around him, you can also feel the presence of the composer himself. A steady pulse of strained breathing persists across many pieces, driving home the image of Sakamoto seated at the keyboard. "20211201" begins with the sound before introducing a piano melody draped in a foggy reverb reminiscent of Harold Budd, and the sibilant texture continues across much of the album. Against the backdrop of his carefully sculpted piano lines, the inclusion of Sakamoto's breathing feels deliberate, quietly reminding listeners of his health. The smallest details take on heightened significance as he returns to themes and ideas from throughout his catalog. Pieces like "20220207" and "20220307" build on the mournful, elegiac tone of his film scores for *The Fortress* and *The Revenant*, while "20220302 (sarabande)" looks to Sakamoto's heroes—Bach, Chopin, and Debussy—in its warmth and melodic simplicity.

The chronological, piecemeal nature of the album means that the audio quality and execution are often inconsistent from piece to piece. Couched in an impressionistic, sketch-like feel, the pieces rarely develop as they unfold, and even when Sakamoto pursues more than one theme or idea, as on "20220302," he avoids any dramatic, risk-taking gestures. Much like his friend and Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence castmate David Bowie did with *Blackstar*, as well as Leonard Cohen with *You Want It Darker*, Sakamoto is staring down the prospect of his own death, meditating on the legacy that he will leave behind. But rather than mythologize his life in narrative songwriting or theatrical instrumental fireworks, he's chosen a quiet grace, one more subtle and restrained than even his softest prior work. Rarely does an album this understated say so much.