

A Quest for the Fine Balance
between Tradition and
the Cutting Edge

coba

The world's top accordionist and a composer, coba finds his roots as a musician in his will to change the image of the accordion, which others saw as a minor instrument. The Great East Japan Earthquake provided another major turning point in his musical career.

Limitless Potential, Like that of a Living Organism

"Why the accordion?" is a question coba has been asked often. His elementary school classmate, his high school music teacher, and a news reporter who interviewed him after he returned from studying abroad—they all wondered why he chose this particular instrument. This has become a primordial question that has driven him to pursue the art.

At first, coba himself didn't really like the accordion either. He started learning the piano from his father at the age of three. His father had a penchant for music and played the accordion. As he watched his father play the instrument, it didn't look attractive at all—it was heavy, physically demanding to play, and not in the least cool. Nonetheless, his father bought him an accordion on his birthday when he was in fourth grade, and frankly, he wasn't delighted with the present. The accordion in those days was seen as an instrument for accompaniment. This lack of the player's identity, unlike the piano, was another reason for his distaste.

Yet coba was fascinated by the instrument's high potential. "You play the melody with your right hand," he explained, "while playing the accompaniment with your left hand. You work the bellows to make air flow through the reeds, which produce sounds. The mechanics of the instrument and its versatility make you feel as if you are handling a living organism."

When he was a first-year high school student, he agonized over who he was and what to make of his life. This experience convinced him of his passion for the accordion. "The accordion has strong, distinctive characteristics," coba says, "and this is a sign of its deep potential as an instrument. I thought no one really understood that. The accordion was not a tool simply for accompaniment. When I was 16, I made a vow to myself to change that image, to turn the ugly duckling into a swan."

There is no music college with an accordion course in Japan, so he went to Italy, a Mecca and the leading producer of accordions, where aspiring accordionists can get the best education in the world. There, he graduated from a music academy at the top of the class.

At the age of 21, he became the first Asian artist to win first prize at the C.M.A., one of the world's most prestigious accordion com-

petitions. To win this competition, you must be a highly accomplished musician with deep knowledge in broad genres ranging from baroque to original pieces. "When I was in school," he said, "I devoted all my energy to taking in the whole essence of the old school. If you want to do a new type of art, you can't take the old school lightly. Whatever your pursuit or passion, first you have to thoroughly learn and internalize the history and established forms until they become a part of you. Then you start to take them apart."

Björk and the Earthquake: A Quest for the Essence of Music

While the accordion is often used to play folk music like polka and tango, coba always wanted to do rock music. But it was not easy in reality. In the early stages of his career, he was barely able to make a living, let alone spend much time on pursuing his ideal music. After a period of doing studio work for a living, he joined Björk, a world-famous diva from Iceland, on her world tour starting in 1995. This experience gave him confidence in playing with a rock band. "Björk herself visited me backstage at one of my concerts," coba recalled, "It was a truly happy meeting. Mutants in search of new forms of art are always looking for individuals they can share their passion with. That's how it felt to me at the time."

When coba released his first album in 1991, he made three rules, partly as a way to help dispel a common misunderstanding about the accordion: don't do accompaniment, don't do solos, and don't do covers. Twenty years later, he broke these rules, for reasons related

to the Great East Japan Earthquake.

To help support victims of the earthquake and tsunami, coba held a mini concert in Natori, Miyagi Prefecture. Natori is a city known as the birthplace of "Matsushima Tairyo-bushi," a well-known fisherman's song. After he finished playing, one woman in the audience said, "Why aren't you doing Tairyo-bushi? You've gotta do Tairyo-bushi when you're in Natori!" She sang out the opening phrase of the song, clapping her hands, then the men in the audience, who were living in shelters at the time, stood up and started singing together, with the women clapping their hands. Soon, a master singer of Tairyo-bushi who happened to be nearby rushed over to join the singing crowd.

"As I watched the scene, I felt, 'This is music!'" coba said. "It was as if they thrust the essence of music at me. It doesn't matter if it's an accompaniment or a cover. If you can't deliver a soul-stirring song and give the listener the strength to live, it's no use talking about new art. I realized then that the vow I made as a 16-year-old had been made for that day."

As his career progresses, coba wishes to create two things: a new style of opera and show performance. "All I want in my life is to get closer to the essence of my dream," coba said, "even if it is a dream of running around in a barren field."



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coba (Yasuhiro Kobayashi)

Born in 1959 in Nagano Prefecture. Graduated from the Scuola di Musica Luciano Fancelli at the top of the class. Became the first Asian artist to win first prize at the C.M.A. world accordion competition. Released his first album *Under the Moon in Sicily* in 1991. Winner of the Japanese Record Award Special Prize. Joined Björk's world tour starting in 1995, while continuing to hold concerts around the world. Creator of over 500 pieces for TV programs and commercials and so on. Received the Japan Academy Award for Outstanding Achievement in Music for his work for the movie *Kao* ("Face"). The striped shirts he always wears are a sign of respect for the "sailors who spread the appeal of the accordion throughout the world."