

Takashi Kokubo Connects with International Musicians and Listeners throughout Global Pandemic

By Clark Adomaitis

On March 11, 2011, the Great East Japan Earthquake, the fourth most powerful recorded earthquake at magnitude-9.0, took almost 16,000 lives and injured over 6,000 more, according to the Japanese National Police Agency.

Ten years later, Takashi Kokubo remembers the lives lost with his new piece, “Requiem in Spring,” a somber, dreary, but meditative ambient production.

Takashi Kokubo is a Japanese ambient environmental music producer who is still creating at the age of 64. He is considered part of the ‘Japanbient’ music scene of the ‘80s and ‘90s.



Takashi Kokubo, 64, in his home studio in Japan.

Environmental music, or *kankyō ongaku* in Japanese, is designed to add ‘sound scenery’ to a physical space. The genre’s purpose is to add character and ambience to physical environments. Companies commissioned composers to create music to accompany their retail products in an effort to add aesthetic appeal. Kokubo’s 1987 project *Get At The Wave* was composed for a line of luxury Sanyo air conditioners.

The genre was a response to message-heavy and overstimulating city pop music that demanded the listener's attention. *Kankyō ongaku*, in contrast with pop music, is meant to be enjoyed casually and calmly.

Kokubo says “the music that ordinary people listen to is packed with strong messages. I think the audience is getting tired. That's why I make music that does not have a lot of information.”

His longform sound environments are filled with lush synthesizer music, entrancing pianos, graceful harps, white noise from running streams, and melodies that birds sing.

Today, listeners turn to Kokubo's music for a similar reason. His music helps them find peace and destress during the coronavirus pandemic. Kokubo explains his music's importance. “It helps us maintain mental balance, to calm our minds mentally. Everyone has to stay in the house and can't go out. These circumstances are stressful.”

He continues to put out new music and receives attention on social media. “Why do I continue? It's like being asked if I eat rice every day. It's a natural thing for me,” Kokubo explains.

Instead of turning into a relic of the past, he has worked to gain popularity with international audiences through YouTube. Numerous albums of his from the '80s and '90s are re-released and new listeners are directed to his music via the website's algorithms. *Oasis Of The Wind II: Story Of Forest And Water*, originally released in 1993 and uploaded to Youtube in 2019, has amassed 1.7 million views. It contains three 16+ minute songs.

“Music that I made thirty years ago is getting re-released, and people overseas are especially interested. I receive appreciative messages from fans on Facebook,” he says.

Kokubo was nominated for a Grammy in 2020 for Best Historical Album. His music was included on the compilation album *Kankyō Ongaku: Japanese Ambient, Environmental & New Age Music 1980-1990*. The album features Kokubo and 24 more 'Japanbient' environmental composers from the 80s.

He says this year he connected with those musicians who made similar music as him 30 years ago. "Before that, I wasn't a friend to them at all, and I didn't know anyone," he said, laughing.

Internet connectivity has played a big role in Kokubo's networking and continued music production throughout the pandemic. He met an Italian trombonist living in Switzerland via Facebook. They created a double-length album together via internet communication.

"I am grateful for having met a friend like this. We've never met or recorded in the same space. However, I was able to make very good music by interacting with him on the Internet. Since we're at home in the pandemic, that's how we communicate."

Kokubo started making music in the 1970s when he was in high school. His first instrument was an analog synthesizer. "When I discovered I could create new tones by myself with the synthesizer, I wanted to make a new world of music," he says.

Kokubo did not study music in school, but he studied electronics and acoustic engineering. His love for synthesizers drove him to pursue these subjects. "The synthesizer was a type of electric circuit. I built my own speakers, amplifiers, and synthesizers. I was an audiophile," Kokubo remembers.

In his early days of making music, he was not influenced by other musicians in his genre. Brian Eno was at the cutting edge of ambient music in the '70s, '80s, and '90s. Eno coined the term ambient music, meaning that music could be part of the character of a physical space. However, Kokubo was unaware about Eno's work until later in life. Kokubo's early unawareness of other musicians led him to create ambient music organically.

His lifelong focus on this genre of music has earned himself a living and has moved audiences globally. Ten years after the Great East Japan Earthquake, the COVID-19 death count in Japan is 8,750, according to John Hopkins University. Kokubo continues his work of bringing people peace and calm throughout times of tragedy.

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