



Warner-Pioneer unearth an Oriental Madonna

# Pioneering work in the East

**W**EA INTERNATIONAL in Japan is represented by the Warner-Pioneer Corporation, which was founded in 1970.

The company has more recently experienced great success under the inspired leadership of Tokugen Yamamoto, who assumed the reins when Keith Bruce, who held the job before, became a senior vice-president of WEA International. Tokugen remembers the date well — November 16, 1981.

He had worked previously for RCA for 25 years. When he took over at Warner-Pioneer, Yamamoto found that a new artist, girl singer Akina Nakamori, was in the throes of signing to the company. Yamamoto saw the signing through to completion, and happily reports today that Akina Nakamori, has played an important part in the growth of Warner-Pioneer's market share relating to domestic product, which has risen under intense competition from 4.5 per cent to 5.3 per cent.

She signed when she was 16, and Akina, no longer a teenager, has never sold less than 1/2m units of each single and LP/tape. Yamamoto likens her in both

appeal and popularity to Madonna, and she is considered to be the biggest selling Japanese artist now. She holds three platinum albums, Bitter And Sweet, D404ME and Silent Love, plus two platinum and two gold singles, won in 1985.

Since he joined the company, Tokugen Yamamoto has also added to its roster such names as Sadao Watanabe with his Maisha gold LP last year, internationally known heavy metal band Loudness and Masashi Sada. Tokugen rates the latter the most popular live concert attraction in Japan. Each of his 150 or so gigs last year sold out on the day tickets went on sale, and he is a singer/songwriter in the vein of the mid-Sixties folk/rock superstars. His songs are by turn socially aware and humorous observations on life. One single was about a chauvinistic husband, and sold over 1.5m copies.

In addition Eikichi Yazawa, Japan's big name in heavy rock, whose fortunes have recently soared with his smash hit Warner-Pioneer LP, Yokohama Hatachi-Mae. New signings of whom Yamamoto expects much in future include Sachiko Kobayashi, who plays a traditional Japanese music called Enka, which he likens to country and

western. Another addition is George Yanagi, a Ray Charles-like performer who has performed with The Genius.

**A** MEASURE of how successful Warner-Pioneer was last year is that in a recent award ceremony, the company collected 40 per cent of the first prizes, including Best Single (for Like A Virgin by Madonna), Best Female Artist (Madonna) and Best New Act (a-ha). Warner-Pioneer collected the most coveted award, for most consistently successful promotion of their artist roster — Glenn Frey and Phil Collins were included among the 10 most successful promotions of the year.

Such successes with international WEA acts are in addition to

Akina Nakamori's position as the most successful domestic act. Yamamoto says it's teamwork that accounts for his company's increasing success (sales have doubled since 1984): "We have a team that really works hard for us."

Apart from names already mentioned, Warner-Pioneer's biggest international acts include Prince, Howard Jones and Foreigner, while a-ha's debut album sold over 100,000 copies, remarkable for a previously unknown act. This kind of performance has led to the company's international repertoire market share leaping from 4.6 per cent in 1980 to 15.8 per cent now.

But Tokugen Yamamoto equally supports his domestic signings, singling out for special mention new group Shonentai, who specialise in acrobatic dancing as well as music. They are contemplating expanding their already highly successful local presence — their first single entered the chart at number one — by recording in future in the US.

Yamamoto is also proud of his company's high sales of video products — a live video cassette of Akina Nakamori has exceeded 20,000 sales, while Madonna's

Virgin Tour video has sold 10,000.

For a non-Japanese artist, according to Yamamoto, that is amazing. Both items will soon be available on video disc, and projected sales targets are 15,000 units for Nakamori and 20,000 for Madonna. This is remarkable when you consider that a video tape costs the equivalent of about £55 and a video disc the equivalent of about £27. As far as compact discs go, Warner-Pioneer, like everyone else in the field, simply cannot get enough to match demand.

**O**NE NOTABLE enterprise in which Tokugen Yamamoto is deeply involved is an attempt to formalise definite criteria for sales awards. Informal quantities are used. A domestic repertoire album is regarded as having achieved platinum status when it tops 200,000 sales, and an international act needs to sell 100,000 copies for the same status. This, of course, is in a country where retail price maintenance is still very much in operation, with LPs selling at the equivalent of about £10 with no discounts.

Warner-Pioneer, with five branch offices apart from its Tokyo headquarters, and 285 employees, is now ranked among the top five Japanese record companies, and aside from everything else, has recently formed Jared — in partnership with CBS/Sony, Toshiba/EMI, Pony/Canyon and Tokuma — a warehousing and distribution company.

His ambitions for this year? "To at least maintain our improved level of sales with international repertoire, and to increase our market share as far as local product goes by 5 per cent. We have a young, aggressive staff dedicated to music. Among their priorities in the new year will be to break ZZ Top in Japan, as they are not broken here yet and to do the same with a young guitarist on MCA, Charlie Sexton. We have a lot to work with, which makes our job easier and much more pleasant."



WEA High kicks from (l to r) Shonentai member Katsu, WEA International chairman Nesuhi Ertegun, Shonentai's Higashi and Nicky, WEA International vice-chairman Ramon Lopez and Warner-Pioneer president Tokugen Yamamoto.

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