

Raymond's excursions into East Asian pop music, episode 3: Morning Musume (モーニング娘)

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It really all started with Katamari Damacy (塊魂). The music for that game is so darned infectious, and it was my fascination with that music that prompted my colleague to loan me the CDs his wife bought while she traveled through Asia. I already mentioned China Dolls (中國娃娃). Another of the CDs in the collection was 4th Ikimasshoi! (4th いきまっしょい! = 4th Let's Go!), the um fourth album from the J-Pop group Morning Musume (モーニング娘 = Morning Girls). I'm sure somebody will correct my Japanese translation. Yes, these are the girls who in the United States are probably known only for having pork chops tied to their foreheads while being stalked by a lizard or being chased by American fighter Bob Sapp or being freaked out by a clip from the movie *The Ring* or traumatizing one of its members by dressing her up like a seal and making her hang out at the polar bear tank. From what I can gather, they aren't so much a pop music group as a marketing phenomenon, what with their own television show and endorsement contracts. And yes, it's a singing group with thirteen members. Thirteen. When I first glanced at the album cover, I just assumed that it was the same four or five singers dressed up in different costumes, but no, it really is a group with a ridiculous number of members. Their music is bubble-gum J-Pop, often catchy, but sometimes just plain awful. (And sometimes really awful or horrifically I-can't-even-watch-it awful.) But I found at least the catchy tunes useful, because they're energetic and kept me going on longer bicycle rides. It probably helped that I didn't understand the words, though I strongly suspect they're singing about love. (I also find that even the catchy songs tend to be ruined by the videos.) Setting aside the musical merits, I have to admire the logistics of organizing a performance of such a large group. Compare, for example, this music video for Osaka Koi no Uta (大阪恋の歌 = Osaka Love Song) with a live performance of same. In the music video, you can just cut from one vocalist to the next, but in the live performance, the singers have to physically trade places. It's so complicated that some dedicated fans have color-coded the lyrics to keep track of who sings what.

Another of my colleagues more tuned into the contemporary music scene learned of my fascination with Japanese pop music and dedicated himself to finding some *good* Japanese pop music, just to show me that it's not all bubble-gum. More on that in the next episode.

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