Episode Book

EPISODE #6405

Why Daily Singing Disappeared and How to Rebuild It

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SYNOPSIS

Daily singing once structured ordinary life, from Danish communal morning rotas to Victorian domestic sheet music. But modern life largely reduced adult singing to sports matches and birthday parties. Drawing on vocal physiology, cross-cultural musical archives, and Danish morning songbooks, this guide explores why morning voices feel croaky and how low-stakes, stepwise music can reintroduce non-performative daily song to a modern household without causing family resentment.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Most coverage of singing in daily life leads with the same picture: a woman spinning on a hilltop, a whole street joining the chorus, life as a musical. Nobody in this flat wants that. Daniel doesn't either, and he's said so. His ask is smaller. He's been doing hours of vocal work for his language-model fine-tune, and it's made him treat his voice as a real asset. He's noticed that as the voice gains strength through the morning, confidence arrives with it. So he wants a song to open the day, maybe one to close it, maybe one before lunch that the household shares, and he wants to know whether anyone has ever done this on purpose. He also thinks we've let the list of occasions where singing is acceptable shrink to almost nothing.



Herman

Herman Poppleberry, here to say the answer to "has anyone done this" is yes, at national scale.



Corn

Hold the Danes. First the thing he noticed. The voice at seven in the morning is not the instrument it is at noon.



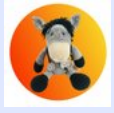
Herman

Right, and that part is physical.



Corn

Good. Because my morning voice is mostly a rumour.



Herman

Here's the frame. This isn't "how do I become a person who sings." It's what it takes to make singing a scheduled, ordinary part of a day. Two halves. Physiology first: the voice really is different in the morning, and warming it up plausibly has a confidence knock-on. Then culture: why the occasions narrowed, and whether the narrowing is a universal law of modernity or something more local.



Corn

And the evidence on the confidence part?



Herman

Nobody has measured it. No study takes morning voice strength and tracks confidence later in the day. The claim lives in teachers' advice and marketing copy. The nearby evidence is on group singing and mood.



Corn

So either Daniel's wrong or he's unstudied.



Herman

Unstudied, I'd say. A voice that won't do what you ask is a small daily humiliation, and one that will is a small daily competence. That's a perfectly good mechanism without a paper.



Corn

But a mechanism without a paper is also how most wellness advice gets started. How would you tell the difference between a real effect and a nice story?



Herman

You'd have to run it. Take people with the same morning routine, give half a warm-up and half silence, and measure how they rate themselves at noon and at five. Nobody has bothered. Until then it's a plausible story with a reasonable physical basis, and I'd hold it at that.



Corn

And the obvious snag is that people who warm up their voices are probably people who already like their voices.



Herman

Which is why the experiment needs random assignment. Otherwise you've only measured who enjoys humming at a kettle. Self-selection would swamp everything.



Corn

Start with the croak, then.



Herman

A voice teacher, Spencer Welch, puts it plainly: when you sleep, so does your voice. Muscles go slack, circulation slows, tissues stiffen. Another coach adds fluid accumulating in the tissues overnight, and dry air makes them less pliable. Hence the morning alter-ego.



Corn

So it's swelling and dryness. Not a personality.



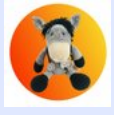
Herman

Not a mood, no. The Ariella Approach says none of us are equipped to sing an aria, or give a business presentation, first thing. The job is moving from the half-there morning voice to the full daytime one. Step one in every routine is water.



Corn

I could manage water.



Herman

And the warm-ups are short. School of Rock says ten to twenty minutes. One guided routine is six tiny exercises that ask nothing of a cold voice, about four minutes, starting with a hum and lip trills. Another app builds five, ten, fifteen or twenty minute routines designed to run on your phone while you stand at the kitchen counter.



Corn

Lip trills at the kettle. Hannah will have views.



Herman

Which is the point. It's non-performative. People already buy that.



Corn

What do you mean, buy that?



Herman

Stretching, for one. Nobody thinks you're showing off when you touch your toes before a run. A hum while the toast is going is the same category: maintenance, not recital. If Daniel frames it that way to the household, the embarrassment drops a good deal.



Corn

And the lip trill itself? It sounds like a motorboat impression.



Herman

It is, roughly. You blow air through loosely closed lips so they flutter while you slide up and down in pitch. It's gentle on the vocal folds because the lips take the pressure. A cold voice can do it without strain, which is why it opens so many routines.



Corn

Do you buy the confidence leap, Herman? Honestly. You were a pediatrician. You've watched small kids go from croaky and shy to loud in about an hour.



Herman

I buy it as a feedback loop. The nearest measured thing is choir singing raising self-efficacy and self-esteem in bereaved people, fifty-eight of them. Group, not solo, not morning. But the direction fits. Do something your body does well, early, and the day starts from success.



Corn

Fifty-eight is not a lot.



Herman

No, and bereaved choir members aren't Daniel at his kitchen counter. I'm using it as a direction, not a proof.



Corn

Fine. Now the Danes.



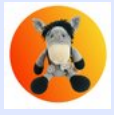
Herman

Which raises the question Daniel actually asked. B.S. Ingemann wrote morning songs for children in eighteen thirty-seven, with music by Weyse, and evening songs the year after. The morning set is seven songs, one for each day of the week, plus a spring song.



Corn

A song per weekday. Somebody gave Denmark a rota.



Herman

And it's known in Denmark the way Hans Christian Andersen is, and barely known outside. Sten Høgel calls it one of the finest creations of the Golden Age. The tunes were built for untrained communal singing: within the compass of a ninth, mostly within an octave, stepwise motion, small intervals.



Corn

So designed to be sung badly.



Herman

Designed to be sung by anyone. Think of it as the opposite of a pop chorus that climbs to a high note and dares you to follow. Nothing in these tunes asks you to leap. They were written for the Copenhagen day nurseries, which spread because industrialization was taking working-class women out of their homes. Ingemann donated them.



Corn

He gave away a national institution. Generous, for a poet.



Herman

The evening songs are different. Harder, with leaps of sevenths and octaves, and only one is for children. Easy mornings for everyone, more artful evenings.



Corn

Which makes sense. At seven you're a hum with legs. At night you can attempt a seventh.



Herman

Daniel could steal that design outright. And it's maintained. In August nineteen ninety-five a Politiken front page showed Copenhagen schoolchildren singing "I østen stiger solen op" off an overhead projector, caption saying morning singing in schools was becoming popular again. The nineteen ninety-three Højskolesangbogen has six morning songs to four evening ones.



Corn

An overhead projector. The most Danish possible revival.



Herman

So the template is modest, calendrical, low-skill, communal. The harder question is the household, because singing the day in for a family is a different proposition from doing it for yourself.



Corn

Because somebody in the house didn't ask for it.



Herman

Exactly that. The USC folklore archive has a Korean-American family's morning song: the morning sun has arisen, get up from bed, brush your teeth, wash your face, let's go to school. Lovely. And an American grandfather who sang "it's time to get up, it's time to get up" at full volume. His daughter said that after she moved out she never wanted to think about that song again. He sang it so loudly and so early.



Corn

So the ritual is a gift and a tyranny, depending on who's holding the covers.



Herman

Same song, same house, two verdicts. Worth admitting. Notice the Korean-American song is also a checklist: get up, brush, wash, go. The song does a job. The grandfather's song only announced that he was awake.



Corn

So a useful song gets forgiven where a loud one doesn't.



Herman

That's my reading. Nobody resents a song that gets them out the door on time. They resent being the audience.



Corn

Daniel has a bugle, Herman. I'd like that noted.



Herman

Noted. Other traditions are plentiful, though. A Lakota sacred repertoire includes a Morning Song. In kirtan the audience answers the singer, call and response. The Vaishnava Mangala Arati is glossed simply as early morning song. And work songs are a whole category, sung to coordinate a task.



Corn

So singing the day is common. Denmark just wrote it down.



Herman

Then why did it narrow? Karen Loew in The Atlantic gave three causes: we're insecure about our voices, we don't know the words, we resent being forced. Her example was baseball. The seventh-inning stretch is the last mass adult sing-along, and when the season ends, that's it until spring.



Corn

Insecure, ignorant, resentful. That's also my review of most meetings.



Herman

The economic version is neater. Around nineteen ten, songs like "Let Me Call You Sweetheart" were sold as sheet music, so popularity meant people buying notation to play at home. Sheet music demanded participation. Records demanded only purchase. One writer recalls a childhood where Julie Andrews breaking into song in the course of her day wasn't the least bit unusual.



Corn

Which is Daniel's fantasy, but with an upright piano.



Herman

And Victorian domestic music was a real market. Joseph Mainzer's eighteen-forties Singing for the Million classes sprang up across the United Kingdom and unsettled the authorities.



Corn

Authorities worried about a million people singing. Reasonable, honestly.



Herman

Here's where I'd push back on the tidy story. A big comparison across a thousand-odd societies, thousands of recordings, found group singing more common than solo singing. And it found no consistent link between group singing and community size or social complexity. Bigger societies don't sing less together.



Corn

So no law of modernity.



Herman

They do concede that in post-industrial societies music is more presentational than participatory. And Estonia: participatory singing didn't vanish, it got institutionalised, into choirs, schools, organised events.



Corn

So it moved out of the kitchen into a building with a schedule.



Herman

Which suggests the narrowing is a Western, adult, middle-class thing. And if the cause is partly material, songs for listening versus songs for singing, then the fix isn't more performance. It's more material built like Weyse's.



Corn

But Daniel can't commission a Weyse. What does he do on Monday?



Herman

Pick songs by the same rules. Narrow range, stepwise, familiar words. A hymn, a folk tune, a nursery song. The test is whether a tired adult can get through it without a warm-up.



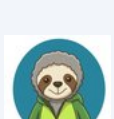
Corn

"Happy Birthday" fails, then. It has that leap on the third word and everyone's flat by the end.



Herman

It does, and yet whole rooms of people attempt it. Which says something: people will sing a hard tune if the occasion gives them permission. A daily song has to be easier, because it can't rely on a cake.



Corn

What does that mean for a household of three, one a toddler?



Herman

What do you think? You're the one who'd have to be awake for the morning one.



Corn

I'd do the evening one. Slower tunes.



Herman

So the practical question is whether a household could ever keep to a schedule of singing, and whether that would change anything at all.
Ivan: This is Harrow. Forty one, sixty seven. Nine nine, twenty three. Forty one, sixty seven. The jar is sealed before the kettle sings. The onion counts the verses, not the choir. Nine nine, twenty three. The lid goes on at midday. Nightjar.



Herman

Understood. Same place as last time.



Corn

What on earth was that?



Herman

Anyway. Whether a household can keep a schedule is mostly about whether anyone's allowed to opt out.



Corn

An opt-out is how it survives. The grandfather didn't offer one.



Herman

Fair. Make the song short enough that skipping it costs more effort than singing it.



Corn

And what about the days nobody feels like it? A rota only works if it survives a bad Tuesday.



Herman

Then Tuesday's song should be the easiest one. The Danes gave each weekday its own song, but nothing says every song has to be equally demanding. Put the simplest on the day you expect the least enthusiasm.



Corn

And a toddler isn't going to opt out anyway. She'll just sing the wrong words with total conviction.



Herman

Which helps the adults. It's hard to feel self-conscious about a flat note when someone two feet tall is doing worse and enjoying it more.

N

Neville

Briefing! Right. So. The briefing is, um, this page. It says "Singing at Home." That's the title. I read the title very carefully.



Herman

Neville, hello.

N

Neville

Hello Herman! Hello Corn! I'm the intern. Sorry. Uncle Hilbert irons his receipts before he files them, and he said I should prepare, so I looked it up on the bus. My flatmate Dougal sings in the shower on Kestrel Street, every day at six, and I thought, Danish. Is it Danish? Or Dutch?



Corn

Danish. Seven morning songs, one per weekday.

N

Neville

Oh, that's much better, actually. I had Dutch and a different number. Also a hedgehog can roll itself into a tight ball with a ring of muscle that pulls the spiny skin around it. Sorry. It just came up.



Herman

Keep going, Neville. Dougal?

N

Neville

Dougal only knows the first line of everything. So the shower is mostly the first line, over and over. The landlord complained, but then he started humming along. It's nine pounds fifty a week for the bathroom, and nobody wants to give that up.



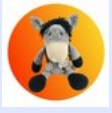
Corn

Sounds like the Danes had the same problem and solved it with a songbook.

N

Neville

A songbook! I'll tell Dougal. And Uncle Hilbert. He'll want it filed.



Herman

Which is the interesting thing about Dougal, Corn. He doesn't know the words, and he sings anyway.



Corn

Loew's second cause, and he ignores it.



Herman

Insecurity doesn't seem to touch him at six in the morning.



Corn

Warm water helps. Or the tiles.



Herman

Both, probably. Warm steam is kind to a cold voice, and a tiled room makes anyone sound better than they are. It's a free rehearsal space with built-in reverb.

N

Neville

So Dougal's been warming up this whole time and nobody told him.



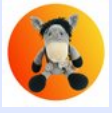
Corn

Nobody told him, and he'd probably stop if we did.

N

Neville

Should I tell him about the songbook, then? Or would that spoil it?



Herman

Give him one song, Neville. Just one, with all the verses. See whether the shower gets longer or shorter.



Herman

So if the occasions for singing are narrowed rather than lost, then Daniel's version, a song at the bookends and one before lunch, has a hundred and eighty years of precedent behind it.



Corn

I'd say it matters beyond the household. A kid who grows up hearing a parent sing badly and on time learns that singing is something you're allowed to do.



Herman

In a world as tense as this one, more of that wouldn't hurt.



Corn

If Denmark can keep one song per weekday for a hundred and eighty years, what does a household need? Better songs, or fewer excuses?



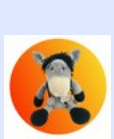
Herman

I think songs written for untrained voices would carry most of it. The excuses mostly evaporate once nobody's performing.



Corn

One adjacent thing we left out. Ingemann's wife wrote in eighteen thirty-seven that he'd written morning songs for the day nursery children, but all but one would do well for children in general. The whole national repertoire started as a note about a spare song.



Herman

A spare song. That's how institutions start.



Corn

Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop for producing, and Neville for sitting in.



Herman

If you enjoyed this one, try episode eighteen sixty-one, Emergency Prep You Can Sing To. This has been My Weird Prompts. If you want more, the show lives at my weird prompts dot com, with a few thousand episodes to work through.



Corn

See you tomorrow.



Herman

Sing something on the way.

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