

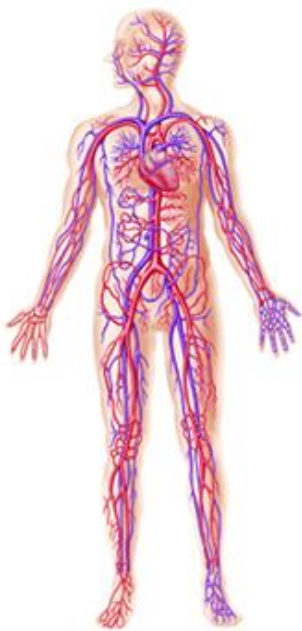
WARMING UP

In athletes and artistic performers, a warm up increases healthy blood flow to the muscles and soft tissue, increasing the literal temperature, as well as the potential for coordination, strength, and endurance.

Singers do them for exactly the same reasons that athletes do them:

Enhanced Performance and Injury Prevention

Singing is a natural human function, just like running or playing. But a performer, like an athlete, has to do it at higher levels, for longer duration, over many years.



Enhanced Performance:

In the short term, the warm up is proven to increase a singer's precision, strength, flexibility, coordination, range, resonance, as well as mental acuity, emotional availability and communicative power.

In the long term, singers who warm up make much faster improvements, learn new pieces faster, sing a greater range of repertoire styles, deal with performance nerves much better, suffer far fewer voice problems, and stay singing longer.

Injury Prevention:

This functions exactly as for athletes. Warm ups increase blood circulation and elasticity in the muscles, tendons and ligaments involved in performance. This enhances the speed of transmission of nerve impulses, for improved coordination, less risk of tearing or tissue damage, or repeated-stress injuries (like [vocal nodes](#)).

Not warming up, for a musician or athlete, would be irresponsible and disrespectful to the team, coaches, fans, and one's own body. Warming up is a gift you give everyone.

The Basics:

BODY BREATH PITCH RESONATORS

Different genres of music require slightly different warmup paths. Here's a [musical theatre cast](#) warming up. Here's a warm up from a lovely [opera singer](#). And here's one from a [pop singing teacher](#). But the best warm ups from any genre, used by working professionals with solid training and experience, all cover these four areas.

BODY

This is the most often ignored area, but that also makes it the “secret weapon” area. Physical engagement is frequently the difference between a performer who embodies the emotional moment of the music, and one who simply “quotes” an emotional idea that happened long ago in a galaxy far, far away. This may be because a warmed body increases the artists’ commitment and interpretive range, but it also brings up a central reality of communication.

Solid [experimental results](#) show that audiences receive more powerful input from the visual than from the aural. This is true even among audiences who say they don’t care about the visual. We use visual input to judge the artist’s skill, commitment, condition, social status, and honesty.

A singer’s interpretation can be seriously impacted by visual inconsistencies, whether it’s a passionate aria from someone standing too stiffly, or a sexy torch song from someone whose body radiates only fear and anxiety.

Technically, a body warm up also immediately improves pitch precision, breathing coordination, and learning speed. So even studio-only singers need a physical warm up. If you could only do one of the four warm up areas, pick Body.



BREATH

Breath is emotion in music. Many warm up breath exercises are designed to build strength and control, so we forget that breath is how we recognize emotional status in other humans. We evolved as social animals, and our fight/flight systems and arousal systems are so easily recognized that we can often read someone’s thought on their inhale, before the onset of sound. Then the sound confirms it.

Just as a dancer couldn’t afford to ignore her arms, we need to be aware of breath as not just the medium of sound vibration, but a central expressive tool in our music.

PITCH

These are the familiar scales we are accustomed to hearing, the equivalent of hamstring stretches. Pitch warm ups bring blood into the voicebox itself, opening up the elasticity of the soft tissues in the larynx. Scales clear mucus out of the way and practice the shifting registers (e.g. chest to head).

Crucial in the early morning, a gentle, progressive pitch warm up is important at any time, even late in the day, since singing range far exceeds speaking range.

RESONATORS

Everything other than the vocal cords themselves is a resonating cavity – the throat, pharynx, sinuses, mouth. A guitar sounds like a guitar mostly due to the shape and density of its body. Similarly, the character, color, weight, and uniqueness of the voice is mostly a function of the resonators. And our resonators are incredibly [flexible](#).

Cultural context (time and place) strongly determines whether a resonance pattern is considered pretty or annoying. The nasal ring of an 80's Broadway ingénue is quite different from a late 60's folk singer, though the range may be similar. Each genre trains singers into slightly different norms, which then become habitual, but the warm up should always stretch those timbral boundaries, so we don't become obsolete when styles shift.

Articulation and pronunciation are also part of the resonance warmup, and similarly have a major role in communicative impact.

Excuses:

I don't have time.

Then you're not serious about singing yet. Which isn't a sin.

I don't warm up and it's fine.

I believe you. When you want to do better than fine, that's when you'll start a conscious warm up habit.

...Wait, how much time does it take, again?

30 minutes is good for some, 15 is good for others, but even two minutes can be useful if they hit the Body, Breath, Pitch, and Resonators. Many warm up exercises address several areas at once.

I don't like warm ups.

What don't you like about them?

...Warm ups are boring.

I have [warm up exercises](#) that come from jazz, classical, theatre, Nashville studio scene and Toastmasters sources. There must be some warm ups in there that don't bore you, but still get the four basic areas covered.

...Warm ups are embarrassing.

Yes they are. Singing isn't for wimps.

I don't know how.

Welcome to the [digital age](#). My [own site](#) has some, too.



Questions:

I sing scales I learned in choir. Isn't that enough?

No. Choirmasters are time-starved, so they generally do the bare minimum to wake up the group. Then they get on with learning the material for that concert that's coming right up. But the fact that you remember that warm-up speaks to how effective it is to have a warm up **habit**.

If you're singing in a choir, warm up before you get to rehearsal. If you're not singing in a choir, then you need a warm-up routine up that works for you as an individual artist, building and sustaining your instrument over a long period of time... not just until the next concert.

Why do some singers sound fine without warming up?



Usually it's because that singer is doing something that uses only a fraction of his skills. The singer is singing half as well as he could be, but maybe that's enough for him. If you're okay with having access to only half your capacity for precision, strength, range, flexibility, and resonance, then maybe you don't need to warm up, either. However, you'd still be at increased risk for vocal injury, especially if you try to sing something with lots of energy, volume, or high note maneuvers.

Why do some singers say they sound better when they haven't warmed up?

Depending on the musical genre, the hallmarks of an un-warmed sound can be interpreted as positives. A crusty voice might be called "gritty"; a weak one might be "vulnerable", a cracking voice might be "emotional", pitch problems might be "earthiness", and inflexibility might be "simplicity".

But usually, the singer who says he 'sounds better' doesn't really sound better at all, and it's simply a way of justifying lack of discipline.

Isn't singing a song also a warm up?

Very few songs cover the pitch or resonance range that a warm up should, and very few songs involve concentrated focus on the breath, or the full range of the body movement that a good warm up involves.

I do have some songs that I sing as the finish to my own warm up, because they are especially rigorous, and will make me instantly aware of any areas of myself that aren't fully awake. But singing just those songs, with no progression into that level of rigor, would injure my voice.