

# Tips for Tuning, Part 1

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One of the most important skills to be mastered by any performing ensemble is playing in-tune. Few teachers would argue with this assertion. Yet, this essential skill is seldom fully taught. One of the most common errors which directors make is to teach only a subset of the many skills required for proper intonation. Playing in tune requires that students (1) understand their instrument and its tendencies, (2) develop the skill to identify poor intonation, (3) develop a sense of melody, (4) develop a sense of harmony, and (5) develop a strategy for solving intonation problems which considers these suggestions.

**Understanding Instrument Tendencies:** Most teachers do a reasonable job of teaching students the natural intonation tendencies of the various instruments. A helpful resource is Tuning the Band and Raising Pitch Consciousness by Dr. James Jurrens. This publication lists pitch problems for every instrument and indicates the degree to which notes are out of tune. While this book is helpful students should also chart the intonation tendencies of their own instrument using a tuning device. When students have identified notes which are out-of-tune on their instruments, they can better anticipate and correct problems.

**Develop the Skill to Identify Poor Intonation:** Again, most directors do a reasonable job of teaching students to identify poor intonation. One of the simplest methods of identifying out-of-tune notes is to listen to the “beats” which occur as the slightly out-of-phase frequencies reinforce then suppress each other. It is important, though, that directors do not allow young students to accept the sound of an out-of-tune ensemble as normal. Students quickly become accustomed to the sound of their ensemble whether it is good or bad. After the concept of a poor sound has taken hold it is difficult to correct.

**Develop a Sense of Melody:** Students must develop a sense of what melodically correct (in-tune) notes sound like. Students must also be able to listen to two notes played melodically (not at the same time) and identify whether or not they are in tune. If not, they should be able to identify whether the second note is lower or higher. There are software programs which drill this skill. The following exercises are suggested for building a sense of melody. (1) Have the students play scales (in a key which is naturally in tune for their instrument). (2) Have the students sing in all keys.

**Develop a Sense of Harmony:** In order for students to play in tune, they must have a mental concept of what a correct chord sounds like. Directors seldom address this essential tuning skill. Many intonation problems result when chord members are out-of-tune. The best way to develop a sense of harmony is to have students listen to music. High quality recordings by talented ensembles should be used. Having the band play chorales in simple keys is also helpful. Again, if students sing harmonies then they have a much better chance of playing them in tune also.

**Develop a Strategy for Solving Intonation Problems:** Students must be given a strategy for solving intonation problems. While numerous models are possible, the strategy must take into account the melodic and harmonic aspects of the problem. When students are playing solo lines their sense of melody will aid them in determining if they are playing correctly or not. If students are playing accompanying figures, then their sense of harmony will help. If students are playing in unison with other section members they should listen for a perfect unison within the section and also a perfect harmony between other members of the ensemble. Encouraging all members to tune to the lowest voice playing (usually the fundamental of the chord) has some merit. There are usually fewer lower voices so there are fewer instruments to establish conflicting tonal centers. Also, the sound of the lower instruments is audible virtually all of the time so there are fewer instances of the pitch referent being lost in the ensemble.

The task of playing in tune is not easily mastered. It requires melodic and harmonic skills. It requires students be able to tune to instruments with different timbres. More than anything, however, it requires that students use all of the skills at their disposal to play in-tune. When students are only equipped with a few of the necessary skills they can only achieve limited success.

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