

Tips For Tuning, Part 2

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Tips For Tuning : Of all the skills that band directors teach, one of the most important is good intonation. Few things detract more from a performance than poor intonation. Even the most technically dazzling ensembles are unable to achieve musical results when tuning problems are evident. The development of good intonation skills must receive the consideration of the prudent director.

The process of tuning may be summarized quite concisely. It consists of two steps: starting in tune and staying in tune. Unfortunately, the old maxim, "Easier said than done." is particularly applicable to intonation. In addition to being one of the most important skills tuning is also one of the most difficult. Tips for helping students start and stay in tune are given below.

Starting In Tune: In order for students to play in tune with one another, they must begin in tune. A time of tuning should be planned for every rehearsal. With experienced groups the time allotted may be brief but under no circumstances should it be omitted. When new groups are assembled or when the temperature or other environmental conditions have changed significantly, tuning should be given additional emphasis.

The time allotted to tuning should be structured so that it is as productive as possible. One frequent problem is tuning too soon. All instruments rise in pitch as they warm up. Since the amount of pitch change of each instrument varies, tuning before the pitch of the ensemble has settled guarantees intonation problems. A reasonable time of warm up should be allowed before tuning occurs. Some directors prefer to have the students warm-up individually while some prefer playing soft, legato scales or chorales with the entire ensemble. Both methods work so long as instruments are warm before tuning.

The actual tuning may be carried out in a number of ways. Students may tune to an electro-mechanical device, to their section leader, or to a single instrument. Each of these approaches has advantages and disadvantages which are described below.

The use of electro-mechanical devices in tuning is increasing. The advantage of these devices is that near perfect tuning is achieved at the onset of the rehearsal. A disadvantage is that since most rehearsal rooms contain only one or two of these machines, tuning all students requires a substantial amount of time. If tuning is carried out with the entire ensemble looking on, the first instrument tuned is frequently cold by the time the last instrument is finished. Blowing warm air through the instruments helps but students find this boring. If tuning is carried out before rehearsal, students must be given enough time to both warm-up and tune. Another disadvantage is that these devices do not promote independent tuning skills. Nonetheless, the use of these devices is useful with young students, at the beginning of the year, after extended holidays and at times when the temperature fluctuates by large amounts. These devices help students identify the approximate "in-tune" location of their tuning slides under the current conditions.

Another common method of tuning is to tune the section leaders and then have them tune the members of their section. A problem with this method is that while section leaders may all start in tune, small errors tend to be amplified throughout the various sections. This method of tuning has the advantage of placing students under the tutelage of an older and more experienced performer and of allowing students to practice tuning their pitch to an instrument with the same timbre. A formidable problem, however, is found in the difficulty of maintaining unity of pitch between all section leaders.

Tuning all of the instruments to the sound of a single instrument is another common method of tuning. When this method is used, the pitch referent should be audible at all times. Too frequently the referent is absorbed in the sonority of the ensemble. As louder instruments join in, the ensemble begins to adjust to the prevailing sounds. One method of avoiding this problem is to have small groups tune at a time. Small groups do not overpower the pitch referent. Once students are in tune they drop out. This thins the texture and allows students who are having difficulty tuning to more clearly hear and compare their pitch with the referent. An equally effective solution for overcoming the "disappearing" referent problem is to have students tune to an instrument which is audible at all times such as the tuba. An advantage of tuning to a low instrument such as the tuba is that it is indeed audible at all times and at most times during performance. A disadvantage of tuning to a low instrument is that students frequently find it difficult to tune to an instrument

with a different timbre. Tuning all instruments to a single referent also requires that students be able to distinguish independently whether they are in tune or not (with an instrument whose timbre and range probably do not match their own) and if not what they must do to correct their sound. This skill, however, is essential for in-tune performance so including it in the pre-rehearsal tuning is not unfair.

The most appropriate technique for getting the ensemble to start in tune differs depending on the ability and maturity of the ensemble. Very young students should be encouraged to use the electro-mechanical devices more frequently than older students. Older students should be encouraged to rely upon their ear more than the tuning machines. Intermediate students will benefit as they practice tuning their instrument to a similar instrument. Advanced students should be expected to tune their instrument to any instrument timbre encountered.

Staying in Tune : Many directors rely on a pre-rehearsal tuning ritual to take care of ALL intonation problems. Tuning before rehearsal insures only that the ensemble is in tune at the beginning of the rehearsal. Tuning is NOT a single event occurring just once, but is a continuous and on going process. Directors who teach their students to tune a single note are mastering only one minute step in the tuning process.

Band directors frequently plead (or shout) for the students to “listen” or “play in tune”. Such comments indicate that there are problems but do not indicate how they should be solved. Before students can independently solve intonation problems, they must understand the process of tuning. Such comments should be avoided unless the director knows that the students understand exactly what to listen for and how to play in tune. The process of tuning is complex and involves many different skills. The major skills required include having a proper mechanical procedure in mind, having proper listening skills, recognizing out of tune notes, identifying the pitch level of instruments within the student’s section, identifying the pitch level of instruments in other sections, playing unison notes in tune, playing chords in tune and playing in tune with the fundamental of the chord.

In order for the students to begin taking on the responsibility of tuning themselves, they must first be taught the physical mechanics of tuning their instrument. These mechanics include: pushing in and pulling out the correct part(s) of the instrument in the wind instrument sections, in addition to rolling flutes in or out, and tightening or loosening the embouchures. For the string section, this would include: tightening or loosening pegs and positioning fingers lower or higher.

Students should also learn the pitch tendencies of their instruments. Dr. James Jurens book, Tuning the Instrumental Ensemble, is an excellent source of information on which notes on the various instruments are normally out of tune.

Other skills required for staying in tune include understanding the beats which are heard when unison notes are played out of tune, and identifying unison notes which are out of tune whether the notes are presented harmonically or melodically. The student must also be able to tune unison notes of the same timbre, unison notes of different timbres, notes of the same timbre at the octave, notes of different timbres at the octave and tune their instruments to various chord tones in ensembles of like and different timbres.

The creative director will provide students with opportunities to develop all of these skills and will not resort to meaningless in-structions to “play in tune.” The teacher must also be able to assist students in evaluating their pitch at all times. Unless the teacher can distinguish between good and poor intonation, there is little hope that the student will learn to do so.

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