

Tuning for Beginner Bands (First-year Players)

by Fred J. Allen, Stephen F. Austin State University

Tuning in the beginner year? Are you crazy? Why would I take the time to do something that complicated?

Of course, you should tune in the first year of instruction! It is not as difficult as it may sound and well worth the time. After all, you have to listen to them every day, don't you? Do you really want to stand in front of a group of students who are perpetually out of tune? No, of course not! And students who get used to hearing good intonation won't be satisfied with bad intonation.

Step 1. In the first week that the students are assembling the instruments for beginner band, the teacher should begin to make some "ballpark" adjustments. Most flutes can start with the headjoint pulled out about a quarter of an inch. Most clarinet barrels can be pulled enough to stick your thumbnail between the barrel and the upper joint. Most brass should have the tuning slide pulled about a quarter to one-half inch. Use your ear, or if you are uncertain, use a tuning mechanism.

Step 2. Teaching good tone must be a priority in the beginner year or none of this matters! Students who play with good tone will be close to being in tune, notwithstanding other factors (range, dynamics, etc.). Students who play with good tone can also learn to adjust pitch without sacrificing tone quality. Good tone has to be important from the first time the students begin to actually make sounds on the instruments.

Step 3. When "tuning," students must be absolutely quiet so they can hear accurately and without distraction.

Step 4. Teaching students what "in tune" sounds like. [For me, this demonstration usually happened after students had been playing for about a month. Then follow up weekly, at least.] This is most easily done by using a pair of players. Have player "A" hold a note steady. Have player "B" play the same note and adjust pitch until the waves disappear. This is what "in tune" sounds like.

Many teachers will use two trombonists for the first demonstration of intonation, because the slide is so easily manipulated while sustaining the tone.

Teacher: "Trombonist A, play and hold your third-position E-flat. Trombonist B, start with your slide in fourth position and move it slowly into third until the waves disappear. Class, listen closely and raise your hands when you hear the waves disappear."

You may ask, "Does this really work? Can players in the beginner year really hear the difference? Is it worth the time it takes to stop and do this?" YES, YES, YES!!! You will be amazed at how well students hear when they are instructed to listen, match and adjust.

Fred J. Allen is Director of Bands at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas. In addition to conducting the Wind Ensemble at SFASU, he also teaches conducting and music education classes. He oversees nearly three hundred band students involved in the SFA band program, in three concert groups, the marching and pep bands and several chamber ensembles. Mr. Allen has conducted All-Region and All-State Bands throughout Texas and the Southwest, where he is also an active clinician and adjudicator. He has often served as guest conductor for bands playing at the Mid-West Band Convention and the Texas Music Educators Association Convention, and has conducted the Seoul Wind Ensemble and the Al Fine Concert Band in Taegu, Korea. He remains current in the public school classroom through regular visits to area band classes, from beginners through high school.

This article is reprinted with permission from the Texas School Music Project web site (<http://www.tsmp.org>). This site is sponsored and produced by the music faculty at Stephen F. Austin State University with the purpose of providing practical information for public school educators, students, and all interested musicians.