

# Tuning for Intermediate & Middle School Bands

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

How can a teacher effectively incorporate teaching good intonation? Teachers already have an increasing amount of elements which must be taught in ever decreasing amounts of time! Fortunately, good intonation is easy to incorporate into the daily routine of the class without taking much time.

## **Fundamental facts:**

1. Students must be striving for good tone, or intonation problems become magnified.
2. If the teacher demonstrates by his/her actions that tuning is important, students will be more likely to adopt the same attitude.
3. The room has to be quiet for players to hear, match and adjust.
4. The instrument must be warmed up in order to play in tune. To all the directors who have students line up at the tuner as soon as their instruments are assembled you are going to have to tune again!

**Think about it:** Cold instruments play flat, and the air coming out of your body is warmer than the air temperature of your band room. Yes, when we “warm up,” we are literally “warming up” the instrument to a temperature higher than the surrounding air. Therefore, you have to play for a few minutes in order for this to occur.

5. Dynamics, range, reed strength, valve combinations—these are just a few elements that will change intonation. Therefore, it is best to use a mid-range pitch at a mid-range volume for tuning. Actually, most young players need to be told to play “forte” in order to be truly playing what will become, in later years, a mid-range volume.

**Strategy 1:** If you have band every day, consider formally tuning one-fifth of the band each day. Monday: flutes, oboes; Tuesday: clarinets, bass clarinets; Wednesday: all saxophones and horns; Thursday: trumpets and tubas; Friday: trombones and euphoniums.

If you meet every other day, you can adjust this schedule. You may have to spread it out over a two-week period, but that is okay. Any tuning you do is better than none!

**Strategy 2:** Use pairs as described in the Beginner Band section above.

**Strategy 3:** Vary the methods of tuning.

Tuning mechanism with strobe or needle indicator: This machine has no opinions, making it a great arbiter of tuning disputes! It is an excellent way for visual learners to see what “in tune” looks like.

Using a device that emits an electronic pitch: This is a great way for a student to make the waves go away. This is actually preferable to the “two pairs” method in one way: the electronic device will not waver unintentionally nor will it run out of air. The student can also learn to use this easily for after-school individual practices, lessons, etc.

Tune by ear: You can’t use the tuner in the middle of a concert to check pitch.

**Try this:** Playing in tune is ultimately up to the individuals producing the sound. Tune in pairs as described above. Play a scale in long note (with fermati). During each pitch, point to two individuals. These two players will remain playing when the teacher cuts off the fermata. The benefit to this is it exposes the sound in progress, rather than the sound at its start. Choose a section of players. Go down the row, having each player playing one half note about quarter note = 60. This method will often make it easy to see which players are sharper or flatter than their neighbors.

**Strategy 4:** Strive to make good intonation more than just a routine. Tape rehearsals to identify problem intonation spots. Try to address at least one intonation problem in the music each day.

**Strategy 5:** Teach students how to use an intonation chart to keep track of their tendencies.

The teacher should specify the range to be checked. The teacher should specify a mid-range note for the beginning pitch. The student will need a partner to help mark the intonation tendencies.

The student begins playing on the mid-range starting note—only on this pitch are they allowed to look at the tuning mechanism in order to stop the needle or light..

Next, the student looks away from the tuner and moves chromatically upward.

The tuning partner marks the chart by indicating how many cents sharp (+) or flat (-) the student is playing. Then the student plays the starting note and moves chromatically downward as the tuning partner marks the pitch variance on those notes.

Now the player has a visual record of pitch variances. Students will look forward to the next opportunity to have their tuning partners check them again. Be sure you have plenty of copies of this chart ready: students love this activity once they learn how to do it!

Teachers, help your students understand that their personal intonation may change slightly as they develop their playing skills. For this reason, foster the attitude that all players have to be ready to adjust intonation at all times. No student should be “in trouble” for being out of tune; they should be helped to listen more carefully! The only student who must be corrected is the student who stubbornly refuses to match intonation, as in the following scenario:

**Student:** “But I’m in tune! You just told me the tuner said so when we warmed up!”

**Teacher:** “You played that note in tune. This one needs adjusting.”

Teachers, learn to predict the factors which can cause even a seasoned player to face tuning difficulty. The middle school years are perfect for teaching a few of these idiosyncratic problems at a time. Teachers who have sectional rehearsals often find that time to be ideal for teaching “problem notes.”

*Fred. J Allen was appointed Director of Bands at Stephen F. Austin State University in June 1994. In addition to his work with the bands, he also teaches conducting and music education classes. Allen has also taught at Abilene Christian University (1987-94) and in Texas public schools at North Richland Hills (1979-87) and Dimmitt (1976-79). Allen is a product of Music Education in the state of Texas. Before playing in the Longview High School Band of John C. “Pete” Kunkel, he was in the bands of Verna Covington and David Pennington in Austin and Don Turner, Paul Stroud and Jimmy Yancey in Longview. His undergraduate studies with Dr. Charles Trayler, then at Abilene Christian University, furthered his training in Music Education. Allen is a frequent clinician and adjudicator in Texas and the Southwest. Working as a clinician with bands from every age level keeps him current in trends in public school bands.*