

Oboes Can Play in Tune!

by William Woodward

All instruments have intonation problems and all students must work hard to play in tune. Most directors would agree, though, that it seems that the oboe is especially vulnerable to intonation problems. Some directors even shy away from the oboe, wary of poor intonation. It doesn't need to be a problem if the student is taught how to play in tune right from the start.

When a student wants to play oboe, make sure that he or she has a good sense of pitch. Test the student's ability to match pitches that you sing or play on the piano. It is critical that the oboist be able to accurately match the pitch of the other players.

It is also important for the student to play on an acceptable reed. The overall pitch of the reed should be A=440 when the reed is pushed in all the way. The reed should not make the high octave sound flat. Look for the American (longscrape) style. A professional oboist is your best bet for good hand-made reeds.

After you have a student with a good ear who is playing on a reed with proper pitch, you are ready to teach pitch adjustment. From my experiences, I have noticed that most students take too much reed into the mouth and exert excessive jaw pressure. This causes poor tone and sharpness of pitch. It also hinders the ability to adjust pitch. The key for in-tune playing is a flexible embouchure. A relaxed jaw allows the lips to gather around the reed and inhibits the teeth biting the reed.

There are two good exercises to help your oboist develop a flexible embouchure. The first exercise consists of having the student play a 5-note scale on the reed alone. The second technique is for you to play a pitch and have the student match the pitch using only the reed. Your oboists should practice matching pitches using their oboes as well. Use a piano or sound a pitch from a tuner. While sustaining a long tone, the student should play sharper, flatter, and then settle on the pitch. The student should not look at the tuner, as you want hearing to be developed with the ears, not with the eyes.

The last step in this natural progression is for the student to be able to match another student's pitch. Have them first practice with single tones. Then have them play duets listening to each other and matching each other's pitch. As with the above exercises, start your students playing duets as soon as possible. Short, quick duets are fine for practicing to match pitch. The sooner the oboe student starts thinking about and working on pitch, the easier it will be to play in tune.

Practicing these techniques gives the oboe student the skills needed to adjust pitch. By teaching the skills and talking about pitch right from the beginning, you can easily have oboes that play beautifully in tune with your band.

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