

*Tuning for High School Bands*  
by Fred J. Allen, Stephen F. Austin State University

Students should be responsible for their own tuning by the time they play in the High School Band. If good intonation has been an important factor in the Middle School years, the student should be ready to adjust continually as they play. If not, the High School teacher will have to utilize some of the strategies noted in the previous section (Intermediate or Middle School).

The High School Band Director should make himself/herself familiar with all the tuning problems and solutions found in the previous article Intonation of Wind Instruments.

Additionally, it may be helpful to refer to the following pages that highlight the unique tuning problems of each family of instruments.

**Points to Ponder:**

1. Good intonation must be based on the lowest sounds of the band. Since all sounds create overtones, it is crucial to get the fundamentals of these overtones in tune. Overtones of the tuba fundamentals, for instance, must align with the fundamentals of the trombone and euphonium an octave higher, and the trumpets two octaves higher. This is why brass sections can achieve a unity of sound not possible in the woodwinds. It is still important, however, for woodwinds to match their pitch to the lowest octave they can hear at any given point in the music.

2. The teacher who asks, "Is that in tune?" "Are you sharp or flat?" or "Which instrument sounds out of tune there?" will achieve more long-term results of students listening than the teacher who simply corrects the problems as they occur.

3. Doing some measure of tuning each day reinforces your belief that playing in tune is vital.

4. Checking more than one note gives you a stronger degree of accuracy in finding a student's pitch center.

5. Having a tuning "ritual" helps speed up the process: students should know which notes you are going to check, if you are tuning one at a time.

6. Because air direction is such a major factor in flute intonation, have them look at their music as they tune, rather than up at the director.

7. Don't tune a piccolo to the strobe: it will sound flat, since our ears are used to that register of the equally tempered piano being "stretched." Tune piccolo by ear!

8. High school players can be taught to lower the third and raise the fifth in block major chords so they resonate off the overtone series.

9. High School players can be taught to raise the 3rd and 7th scale degrees and lower the 4th scale degree in melodic situations.

Some bands are fortunate to have enough tuners to have them spread throughout the band during rehearsal. This is a double-edged sword, however. Whereas it can be helpful in correcting some isolated problem pitches, it can lead to a student's reticence to match pitch with another player, as in the following scenario:

Player "A" is playing a solo melodic line that ends on a G#. Player "B" is required to enter on the same G# after it has begun.

**Teacher:** "Player B, you are out of tune : match pitch with Player A."

**Player B:** "But my tuner says I am right on pitch."

Students have to be reminded that the ultimate tuner is the one between the two ears on each of our heads!

**Personal note:**

I hope these thoughts are helpful. I am willing to respond to any questions or comments if you wish to correspond with me at [fallen@sfasu.edu](mailto:fallen@sfasu.edu), as long as you understand that it may take me a couple of weeks to reply.

*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). He 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. Mr. 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.*

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