

The Benefits of Metronomes and Tuners

by Andrea Redcay, Western Illinois University

If you've been practicing without a metronome and a tuner, you have been trying to run a marathon barefoot! Nothing (besides a quality flute) is more important for the development of solid musicianship than these two tools.

Metronomes

Music is organized by rhythm and meter. Even in a cadenza, we use rhythmic organization to learn the different patterns of notes. If you are not able to communicate an accurate sense of meter to your audience, you'll quickly lose their attention. Successful musicians play with rhythmic stability that they learn from regular practice with a quality metronome. With rhythmic stability comes technical control and evenness throughout your entire range. Most importantly, your playing is more stable in auditions and performances when it really counts most!! Here's my favorite exercise: when practicing a passage in 4/4 time, choose a moderate quarter-note tempo on your metronome. Conduct and count out loud all of the subdivisions (eighth-note, triplet sixteenth-note, etc). Then play the passage with articulated subdivisions on every note.

Tuners

Not everyone has a sense of perfect pitch, but anyone can develop excellent relative pitch (known as a "good ear"). Musicians who have great relative pitch produce a tone quality with depth and focus that really makes you want to listen. The first step in acquiring a "good ear" is to play in tune with yourself. If you practice with a tuner regularly, you are learning your instrument's intonation tendencies. In performance, your "ear" remembers how to guide your embouchure and air column to target pitches correctly. Then, you are not only playing in tune with yourself, but you are a better ensemble player too! Another favorite exercise of mine is to play a slow arpeggio up and down the entire range of your instrument in the key signature(s) of the passage you are practicing. Watch the tuner closely to center each pitch, leave the tuner on and set it aside. Play the passage at normal tempo five times in a row. Each time, randomly place a fermata at some point within the passage and glance over to the tuner to check your intonation.

Before you buy any musical "tools," seek advice from your teachers. They can help you decide which brand and features you really need. Then, you'll need your teacher's help in learning how to properly use the metronome and tuner in your practice routine. There are many creative ways to incorporate both a metronome and tuner during your practice sessions that will not only sharpen your musicianship skills, but also help you avoid boredom (the number one enemy to regular productive practice). Use them properly and regularly and expect wonderful results!

Selection - The Instruments

Fortunately, instrument quality and selection have improved greatly over the last few years, especially at the "student" level. Wood instruments are still superior for the most part, but in school situations plastic is a viable alternative. Some instruments have superior key design. Students often have been observed having difficulties reaching the left hand F and Eb, and right hand Eb keys. Although my new instrument (oboe) is a professional model, these same students had no problem reaching these keys. This leads me to observe the very design of some recognized manufacturers literally creates more difficulties for the student. When purchasing new instruments, take this into account.

Budgets often are not adequate, and it is a temptation to get an instrument of lesser quality or get one with fewer keys. If an instrument were used exclusively for beginners this might be okay: however, too often these beginner instruments do end up in the upper grades and the student is asked to perform at a level not possible on these instruments.

Andrea Redcay is a Yamaha Performing Artist. Professor of Flute at Western Illinois and flutist with the Camerata Woodwind Quintet. She received degrees from Texas Tech University (B.M.), The Juilliard School (M.M.) and The University of North Texas (D.M.A.).

This is an Educator Series Article published by Yamaha.