

# Exploring the Process of Vertical Tuning

**Richard L. Saucedo**

During my tenure as a band director, I was always thrilled when my students had great moments of “side to side” or horizontal tuning. The idea of listening in trios helped a bunch as well, but one concept that truly made a difference in terms of resonance and sonority was the realization by the students that they needed to listen *down* through the ensemble. While listening down, they were constantly on the audio lookout for anchor pitches from which they could tune, such as roots of the chords

in tubas or low woodwinds, but they were also listening for harmonies, especially those harmonies that were used in accompanying any melodies they might be playing within their own sections. The more successful the players became at applying these listening skills, the better the group sounded, no matter what style of piece we were attempting.

As a young director, I was often satisfied if the melodic material was played with beautiful tone as well as in tune, but I also wanted the chords

and the supporting material to sound just as good and as resonant. Where I missed the boat at times was the relationship between all the above. In other words, I never really got the supporting harmonies AND the melodic (as well as counter melodic lines) to really gel in terms of bottom to top sonority, resonance and tuning.

Fast forward to the present. Even though I’m retired, I am honored to have numerous opportunities to conduct honor bands and all-state bands around the country and even



*Industry and Education Partnering Together*



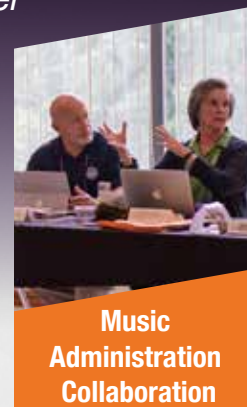
Conn-Selmer  
Institute



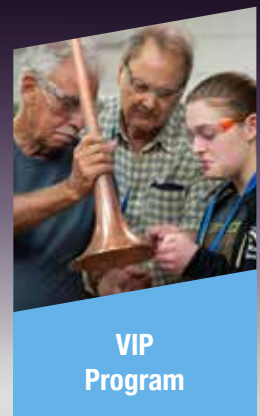
Educational  
Clinics



School Partnership  
Program



Music  
Administration  
Collaboration



VIP  
Program

Supporting Music Education Worldwide  
Through Personalized Service and Support



Tim Lautzenheiser  
Vice President of Education

Connect with us today!

education.conn-selmer.com    @CSlconnect

## Exploring the Process of Vertical Tuning

internationally. While working with these groups, I spend more time than ever trying to get students to do a bit more vertical tuning, even with very little rehearsal time. (Which to say the least is always a bit of a challenge.) It can be done, but only with a bit of patience and a lot of persistence. My favorite comments from students after honor band concerts usually have something to do with the expectations of sound quality, blend and tuning during rehearsals. Even though they often felt overwhelmed by those expectations, they believed the work payed off when they experienced goosebumps during the performance because of the sonority, resonance and overtones produced by the group.

One of the things I'm doing more and more of these days is using an A and B format to separate the players in each section. Let's say, for example, that the flutes are playing some melodic material in the key of Eb Major. After dividing the group into A and B players, I have the A folks play the actual written melody while the B folks are sustaining an Eb Concert drone at the same time. (Note that you could also use an electronic drone to help aid the B players.) While doing this, ask the A players to relate what they're playing in the melody to the Eb Concert drone. Is the melody more Eb scalar or are their outlines of chords in Eb major? You'll be amazed at the difference in pitch awareness by the A players (and you'll probably hear them bring the pitch down). Of course, it's important that the B players holding out the Eb drone are keeping their pitch in tune to provide a solid foundation for the A players, but at the same time, the B players should be listening to how the role of the Eb Concert might change a bit as the melody goes in and out of Eb Major. Either way, the bottom line is that the students playing the melody are starting the process of listening to the root of the key center on which their melody is based, which

**Either way, the bottom line is that the students playing the melody are starting the process of listening to the root of the key center on which their melody is based, which is bound to help the listening process overall.**

is bound to help the listening process overall. Of course, you should then switch roles so that the B players are on the melody and the A players are playing the Eb drone. Depending on the melody, you might also have the drone be the 5th of the key or even sustain the root and the 5th. There are infinite combinations of drones that you might use to help students better listen for key centers and harmonies that effect their melodic material.

The next step is to find a group of students who are playing a melody or countermelody on top of a chord progression. For example, let's say the saxes and horns are playing a glorious melody over the top of some wonderful chords in the low brass/low woodwinds. Have the players listen to the chord progression and then actually hum or sing the progression along with those who play it. At some point, the melody folks should be able to hum the progression on their own and form the chords themselves without the actual low brass/woodwinds playing. Have the B players hum or sing the chord progression while the A players are singing the melody. Switch roles like above so that everyone gets the same opportunities to develop their ears. Even if they can't sing it perfectly, the resulting ear training will go a long way towards getting your group to the level of tuning, resonance and sonority that you're looking for. Again, electronic drones during the singing process will significantly aid the listening process.

Now here's the really good news! Since we don't have lots of time in our rehearsals to do these kinds of things, we need only pick a few places in each piece we're playing to work these concepts. In other words, use only as needed to get your group to the appropriate level of performance. However, do not skip steps if your group needs to spend more time developing listening skills. Probably the best thing we could do is use chorales to teach these listening

## Exploring the Process of Vertical Tuning

concepts so that our students incorporate the process of vertical tuning on their own, each and every time they play. In my experience, I've found that if students can use "just tuning" on simple major and minor triads, their ears automatically move to the next level in terms of awareness. If you can get them listening to more extended chords, all the better! There are many resources on the web if you need reminders about how to tune your winds via "just tuning."

Thanks for reading and please share your own vertical tuning success stories via email so I can keep learning as well. Best wishes to all for a wonderful fall/winter season with your groups!

**Probably the best thing we could do is use chorales to teach these listening concepts so that our students incorporate the process of vertical tuning on their own, each and every time they play. In my experience, I've found that if students can use "just tuning" on simple major and minor triads, their ears automatically move to the next level in terms of awareness.**

*Richard L. Saucedo retired in 2013 as Director of Bands and Performing Arts Department Chairman at the William H. Duke Center for the Performing Arts at Carmel High School in Carmel, Indiana. During his 31-year tenure, Carmel bands received numerous state, regional and national honors in the areas of concert band, jazz band and marching band. Under his direction, Carmel's Wind Symphony I performed at the Music for All National Concert Band Festival three times (1992, 1999, and 2004) and was named the Indiana State Champion Concert Band under his baton most recently in 2013. The group also performed at the Midwest Band and Orchestra Clinic in Chicago during December of 2005. Carmel Jazz Ensembles won numerous awards at jazz festivals in Indiana and throughout the Midwest. The Carmel Marching Greyhounds finished in the top ten at the Bands of America Grand National Championship for 17 years under Saucedo and were named BOA National Champions in the fall of 2005 and again in 2012. The Marching Band was the Indiana Class A State Champion four times. The Indiana Bandmasters Association named Mr. Saucedo Indiana's "Bandmaster of the Year" for 1998-99 and he was named the "Outstanding Music Educator" in the state of Indiana for 2010 by the Indiana Music Educators Association. Mr. Saucedo's accomplishments have been highlighted in articles by HALFTIME and SCHOOL BAND AND ORCHESTRA Magazines. He was inducted into the Music for All "Hall of Fame" in 2015.*

*Mr. Saucedo is a freelance arranger and composer, having released numerous marching band arrangements, choral arrangements, concert band works and orchestral compositions. He is currently on the writing staff at Hal Leonard Publishing. His concert band works have been performed all over the world by middle school and high school bands as well as by college and university groups.*

*Mr. Saucedo travels the world as an adjudicator, keynote speaker, clinician and guest conductor. He will be a guest conductor, clinician or commission composer in over 25 different states and 4 countries during the 2018-19 school year. Mr. Saucedo is an educational consultant and assistant chief judge for Music for All/Bands of America and is a senior clinician for the Conn-Selmer Division of Education.*

*Mr. Saucedo did his undergraduate work at Indiana University in Bloomington and finished his master's degree at Butler University in Indianapolis. He is also an aviation enthusiast and a certified private pilot. Mr. Saucedo is married to his wife Sarah and is most proud of his two children. His daughter, Carmen, received a degree in elementary education from Ball State University. His son, Ethan, is currently in 6th grade and plays basketball as well as studying privately on piano and percussion.*