

Tuning

Intonation in the Beginning Year of Band

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*Tuning in beginner band? **Are you crazy?** Why would I take the time to do something that complicated?*

Of course, you should tune in the first year of instruction! It is not as difficult as it may sound and well worth the time. After all, you have to listen to them every day, don't you? Do you really want to stand in front of a group of students who are perpetually out of tune? No, of course not? Players who get used to good intonation won't be satisfied with bad intonation.

Step 1

In the first week that the students are assembling the instruments for beginner band, the teacher should begin to make some "ballpark" adjustments. Even better, teach this to students when you teach them proper instrument assembly. Most flutes can start with the head joint pulled about a quarter of an inch. Most clarinet barrels can be pulled enough to stick your thumbnail between the barrel and the upper joint. Most brass should have the tuning slide pulled about a quarter to one-half inch. Use your ear, or if you are uncertain, use a tuning standard (mechanism or program).

Step 2

Teaching good tone quality must be a priority in the beginner year or none of this matters! Students who play with good tone will be close to being in tune, notwithstanding other factors (range, dynamics, etc.). Students who play with good tone can also learn to adjust pitch without sacrificing tone quality. Good tone has to be important from the first time the students begin to make sounds on the instruments.

Step 3

When "tuning," students must be absolutely quiet so they can hear accurately and without distraction.

Step 4

Teaching students what "in tune" sounds like. For many teachers, this demonstration takes place after students have been playing for about a month. Then, follow up weekly, at least. This is easily done with a pair of players on a unison pitch. Have player "A" hold a note steady. Have player "B" play the same note and adjust pitch until the waves disappear. This is what "in tune" sounds like: when the waves disappear.

Try this!

Use two trombonists to demonstrate good intonation, because the slide is so easily manipulated while sustaining the tone.

Teacher: "Trombonist A, play and sustain your third-position E-flat. Trombonist B, start with your slide in fourth position and move it slowly into third position until the waves disappear. Class, listen closely and raise your hands when you hear the waves disappear."

You may ask, "Does this really work? Can players in the beginner year really hear the difference? Is it worth the time it takes to stop and do this?" YES, YES and YES!!! You will be amazed at how well students hear then they are instructed to listen match and adjust.

One special note: directors may encourage students to purchase small clip-on tuners to use for reference. For directors who do this, PLEASE be sure to instruct students about the usefulness of those tuners. They tune THAT note in THAT context. Those tuners make no exceptions for tuning a chord with just intonation. They are a terrific resource, but consider using them sparingly, and encourage students to use their ears first, then check the tuning device.