

Tuning for Intermediate and Middle School Bands

(Students in the Second or Third Year of Playing)

Fred J Allen

frjallen1994@gmail.com

Teaching good intonation is easy to incorporate into the daily routine of the class without taking much time.

Fundamental Facts:

1. Students must be striving for good tone, intonation problems become magnified.
2. If the teacher demonstrates by his/her actions that tuning is important, students will be more likely to adopt the same attitude.
3. The room has to be quiet for players to hear, match and adjust.
4. The instrument must be warmed up in order to play in tune. To all directors who have students line up at the tuner as soon their instruments are assembled: you are going to have to tune again!

Think about it

Cold instruments play flat, and the air coming out of your body is warmer than the air temperature of your classroom. Yes, when we “warm up,” we are literally “warming up” the instruments to a temperature higher than the surrounding air. Therefore, you have to play for a few minutes in order for this to occur.

5. Dynamics, range, reed strength, valve combinations—these are just a few elements that will affect intonation. Therefore, it is best to use a mid-range pitch at a mid-range volume for tuning. Actually, most young players need to be told to play “forte” in order to be truly playing what will become, in later years, a mid-range volume.

STRATEGIES YOU CAN USE

Strategy 1

If you have band every day, consider formally tuning one-fifth of the band each day.

Monday: flutes, oboes

Tuesday: clarinets, bass clarinets

Wednesday: saxophones and horns

Thursday: trumpets and tubas

Friday: trombones, euphoniums and bassoons

If your band meets every other day, you can adjust this schedule. You may have to spread it out over a two-week period, but that is still a good strategy. Any tuning you do is better than none.

Strategy 2

Use pairs as described in the handout "Tuning in the Beginning Year."

Try this!

Have the band play a scale in long notes (with fermata). During each pitch, point to two individuals. These two players will remain playing when the teacher releases the fermata. The benefit to this technique is that it exposes the sound in progress, rather than the sound at its start.

Or try this!

Choose a section of players. Go down the row, having each player playing a given pitch as a half note at about quarter = 60. This method will often make it easy to see which players are sharper or flatter than their neighbors.

Strategy 3

Vary the method of tuning.

- Tuning with a mechanism that has a strobe or needle indicator or a program that shows when the pitch is in tune. These mechanisms and programs have no "opinions," making them great arbiters of tuning disputes. These can also aid visual learners, helping them see what "in tune" looks like.
- Use a device that emits a stable electronic pitch. This is a great way for students to learn to make the waves go away. This is actually preferable to the "pair of players" method in one way: the electronic device will not waver unintentionally nor will it run out of air! The student can also learn to use this easily for after-school individual practices, lessons, etc.
- Tune by ear! You can't tune the tuner in the middle of a concert!

Strategy 4

Strive to make good intonation more than just a routine. Record rehearsals to identify problem intonation spots. Try to address at least one intonation problem in the music each day.

Strategy 5

Teach students how to use an intonation chart to keep track of their tendencies. (See below) The teacher should specify the range of pitches to be checked. The student will need a partner to mark the intonation tendencies.

- The student begins playing on a mid-range starting note—only on this pitch is the student allowed to tuning at the tuning device in order to begin the process with good intonation.
- Next the students looks away from the tuner and moves chromatically upward.
- The tuning partner marks the chart by indicating how many cents sharp (+) or flat (-) the students played.

- Then, the student returns to the starting pitch and moves chromatically downward as the tuning partner continues to mark pitch variance on those notes.

Now the player has a visual record of pitch variances. Students will look forward to the next opportunity to have their tuning partners check them again. Be sure you have plenty of copies of this chart handy: students *love* this activity once they learn how to do it!

Tuning chart

Play your chromatic scale and have someone mark down how many cents sharp (+) or flat (-) you are.

The chart consists of six staves, each representing a different pitch range. The top staff shows a chromatic scale from E4 to E5. The second staff shows a chromatic scale from D4 to D5. The third staff shows a chromatic scale from C4 to C5. The fourth staff shows a chromatic scale from B3 to B4. The fifth staff shows a chromatic scale from A3 to A4. The sixth staff shows a chromatic scale from G3 to G4. Each note is accompanied by a small diagram of a tuning fork or similar instrument to indicate the pitch.

Teachers, help your players understand that their personal intonation may change slightly as they develop playing skills. For this reason, foster the attitude that all players have to be ready to adjust intonation at all times. No student should be “in trouble” for being out of tune, they should be helped to listen more carefully. The only who must be corrected is the student who stubbornly refuses to match intonation, as in the following scenario:

Student: "But I'm in tune! You just told me the tuner said so when we warmed up!"
Teacher: You played *that* note in tune, This one needs adjusting."

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 their tuning devices.

Playing in tune is ultimately up to the players making the sound. Help students in the intermediate level learn to become independent in regard to tuning.