

Tuning in the High School Band Setting

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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 my related handouts (Tuning for Intermediate Bands, and Tuning in Beginner Bands). The high school band director should make himself/herself familiar with all the tuning problems and solutions for each instrument. If you are on my web site, I have related handouts for each instrument. If not, there are multiple resources available that identify idiosyncratic problem notes for the various instruments, and in some cases, solutions are offered.

Points to ponder

1. Good intonation is based on the lowest sounds being played. Since all sounds create overtones, it is crucial to get the fundamentals of these overtones in tune. Overtones of the tuba, for instance, must be aligned by the trombones and euphoniums an octave higher, and then by the trumpets two octaves higher. This is one reason why brass sections can achieve a unity of sound not possible by the woodwind section. It is still important, however, for woodwinds to match their pitch to the lowest they can hear at any given moment in the music.
2. The teacher who asks questions about intonation will achieve more long-term results in student listening engagement than the teacher who simply corrects the problems as they occur.
“Which instrument sounds out of tune there?”
“Is that in tune?”
“Are you sharp or flat?”
3. Doing some type 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 the student’s pitch center.
5. Having a tuning “ritual” helps speed up the process. Students should know which pitches you are going to check if you are tuning them one at a time.
6. Because air direction is such a major factor in flute intonation, have flutists look at their music as they play tuning pitches, rather than up at the director.
7. Don’t tune a piccolo to a tuning device. If it registers “in tune” it will sound flat to our ears. Human ears don’t hear the top octave (approximate region) of the piano where it registers in tune: those strings have to be stretched sharp for we humans to perceive

those pitches as “in tune.” The same goes for most of the mid and upper range of the piccolo! Tune piccolo by ear!

8. High school players can be taught to lower the third 14 cents and raise the fifth 2 cents of block major chords so those pitches resonate off the overtones of the root.

9. High school players can also be taught about “melodic line tuning,” wherein one raises the 3rd and 7th scale degrees and lowers 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 their ears!

Taking High School Students to the Next Level of Intonation Awareness

Hopefully, players arrive at the high school setting knowing how to find “in tune” using a tuning device, and even more importantly, by matching a standard (electronic drone, etc.).

Once players demonstrate good fundamental tone production and matching intonation, here is a great “step two.” This can work in full ensemble, but is probably more effective in a smaller group, such as in a sectional.

Position a tuner device screen so that all the students can see it. Have a single player play a mid-range pitch at *mf*. Then have the player execute a crescendo while attempting to hold the pitch center steady. It's a challenge! Even the very top level of players will be surprised at how much a dynamic change will affect intonation. Follow that by having the same player return to the same pitch at *mf*, then have the player execute a diminuendo. Now students will have an added level of understanding as to what factors they face while performing the music.

Reminders

- If a student is playing with good tone, they will find tuning easier.
- One must be warmed up to find their pitch center.
- Always check more than one note when tuning.
- Foster the concept of constant adjustment while playing.
- A tuning device or program only tells you about THAT pitch at THAT volume and as a unison note, not how it might be as a third or fifth of a triad.