

Tuning the Band

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I've been asked several times from colleagues about how I tune my band. I probably spend more time on intonation than technique, which is evident if you hear my group in performance. So how do I get the band to play with good intonation? Here are some tips and tricks I've learned over the years and hopefully, you can put them to use in your band.

Step one is to make sure you are working with the right materials. If you teach different levels of band, you understand that the kids show up with their instruments in much different condition. My students in the top group are usually playing on an intermediate or professional level horn while the kids in my lowest group are still playing on the instrument they received in 5th grade. They most likely have five or six year old pads and haven't received any TLC from an instrument repairman. You have to insist on having instruments in good working condition if you ever plan on achieving that Superior sound.

So, we've got instruments in good working condition, now what? First, we need to warm up the instrument properly so that it is at the correct temperature. Tuning a cold trumpet is futile if you are planning on an hour rehearsal and need to fix intonation. We play a low tone warm-up starting on low Bb and work down to E. Insist the trumpets adjust their third valve tuning slide out so the E isn't incredibly sharp. Then we play a whole note scale for one octave on concert F. Make the band listen to every note and don't continue if it sounds bad. Next, is a lip slur exercise played slowly to get a real lip slur occurring. Next are scales. We play all twelve in two octaves. Use the All-State audition scale pattern. Insist they learn them. While playing scales, you need to listen to the group. If they play them with an ugly tone quality or not in tune, stop them and explain what you hear and what they should do better. Don't assume that they hear what you hear. Sometimes, the more motivated students can hear it and will start to be more diligent about playing scales in tune. I always insist that the band plays the top notes lighter and with more finesse. Screaming the top notes out is not a pleasant sound, plus it trains them to play their scales more beautifully for auditions. We're almost ready to tune.

Later in the year, you'll notice that your students are making adjustments as they progress through the warm-up. You can say, "put your instrument where it was last in tune". At this time, I play through a chorale that we use the entire year. This should be something you know by memory and use it every year. Suggest to the kids to make an adjustment while playing the chorale. If it gets worse, they went the wrong way. Also, make sure the kids understand that if it sounds bad, they should assume they are the problem. So much time is wasted when a student doesn't adjust their own instrument. While playing the chorale, you should try to fix tendency pitch problems. For example, trumpets are always flat on 4th line D's and E's. This is an ideal time to work on phrasing and how to release a

note properly by tapering the releases and listening to the sound you leave in the room. Your students will make it a habit to listen better if you give them indicators to listen for. The better we play in tune, the more percussion instruments that respond with sympathetic vibrations. Experiment by having the band play a chord with a full sound, taper and release the note and stay perfectly quiet. Ask the kids to describe the sound in the room immediately after the cut-off. In my band room, the gong usually sings the root and 5th of the chord we just played. You can also hold the pedal down on the vibes or piano and hear the bars/strings vibrating to the chord you just played. Tuning major chords means the ensemble is balanced like a pyramid with the lower voices playing stronger while the upper register is softer. Also, I make it a point to tell the instruments playing the third to “dull” their sound a bit. Technically, it should run around 14 cents flat to sound better. If you have minor thirds, I usually push them sharp.

So far, everything has been done by ear. Now it’s time to use the electronic tuner. I use the Peterson Virtual Tuner and have recently downloaded a tuner to my iPhone called OmniTuner. Don’t let the student see the tuner. If they tune while looking at the tuner, you aren’t getting an accurate read on the instrument length. You are seeing how well the kid can line up the needle. You hold the tuner and tell them what to do.

Flutes: play A. Tell the student if they are sharp or flat and to push in or pull out. If it’s a major adjustment, come back to check them. **Clarinets:** play D, E, F#, G, C. Hold out the G and the C. As they hold the G, tell them if they are sharp or flat- once you get the read on the G, play the C and do the same. If the G is sharp, pull the barrel. If the C is sharp, pull the middle. **Saxes:** play F#. **Double Reeds:** play A. Typically, they aren’t supposed to adjust their cork or reed, but I allow the younger players. **French Horns:** play G, A, B, hold C. **Trumpets:** G, A, B, hold C. **Baritones:** same. **Trombones:** F, hold Bb. Tune the C trigger too. **Tuba:** F, G, A, hold Bb. Sometimes, you’ll have a student who you tell is sharp, they pull out and play the note exactly the same. They hear it and just keep replaying the sharp note even after adjusting. Have a student next to them play the note in tune and ask them to match the pitch. If they are capable of doing that, they can play and adjust by ear. Replay the chorale and see if there is a difference. This is a process and you’ll have to keep up the routine to see the results. You’ll notice having to use the electronic tuner less and less. After playing together all year and using this tuning process on a daily basis, we only need to tune a few people each day. We spot check on a daily basis and only tune everyone in the band once a week or before going on stage. They get better at taking a reference pitch from the oboes too. If you are pressed for time, place the tuner on your oboe player’s stand. They play A for the flutes, saxes, and double reeds. Then play Bb for everyone. Of course this is only effective if the oboe player is in tune.

This is a process and certainly won’t be an overnight fix. But, taking your time and developing this regiment will definitely pay off in the long run.