

“In Tone and In Tune” Tips for a beautiful sound and great intonation

by Lauren Husting

Developing a good sound takes time and practice. Proper air flow and good ears are needed to match pitches and play confidently by yourself and with others. And good intonation can't be achieved until one begins to fill up the instrument with clear tone. I've worked up a few simple exercises over the years that have made this process tremendously easier for me.

First: Find a drone CD or mp3 collection. One can be found for free here:
<http://www.dwerden.com/intonation-helper.cfm>

A drone in this case is 2 minutes each of all 12 chromatic pitches. A tuning CD is more helpful in ear training and intonation than a tuner because it actually allows you match pitch, rather than have an instrument react to your pitch.

Exercise 1: Scale practice

I like to chose a key for a particular day of practice and focus on intonation in that key. Because our instruments do not always match equal temperament, often times we experience different tendencies in different keys. Spend a little time in major, minor, whole tone, and modal scales to hear where you need to adjust.

Primarily, I set my metronome to a nice easy tempo. Let's say my key for the day is D Major, so I'll set the mp3 player to D. First, I play the scale in whole notes, paying attention to how each interval reacts to the D drone. Then half notes, quarter notes, eighths, etc.

Your goals are as follows:

- eliminate beats between you and the fixed pitch
- create a sound that blends with the fixed pitch
- hear clear intonation of the note before you play it
- use your air and not your embouchure to make adjustments
- keep the tempo steady while quickly making adjustments

Exercise 2: Tune practice

Playing tunes in different keys is great for lots of reasons- it can help us build range, understand key signatures, learn to play by ear, and practice melodic expression. With the addition of a drone we add another step toward playing in tune.

If you are new to playing tunes, start simple. “Ode to Joy”, “Mary Had a Little Lamb”, or “Twinkle Twinkle” are examples of songs that are easy to play in all twelve keys by ear.

(Exercise 2 cont'd)

Set your metronome to a tempo in which you can play the tune in each key easily. Put the tuning CD on the pitch corresponding to your first root. Keep in mind not all tunes start on the root, so do a little experimenting to find the right scale degree.

The goals are the same as in the scale exercise, plus:

- Sing the tune first. Ingrain the melody into your mind so as you play it, you remain focused on that rather than the technical.
- Listen carefully to how each note of the tune reacts to the fixed pitch.
- Take your time on specific parts of the melody if needed.

You can then move through the circle of fifths/fourths, chromatically, or randomly through each key as you please.

Exercise 3: Playing in a group

This technique can very easily be adapted to working with your friends or your chamber music group. Some suggestions:

- Put the fixed pitch on a quality sound system so you all can hear it, and play a scale in unison, then in thirds, etc.
- Have one person only listening to the tuning note and play as though they are the drone, while the rest of you tune around them.
- Play tunes in rounds or in corresponding keys. Try the “Ives” method and play in clashing keys, too.
- Take away the drone and try your hand at tuning to one another’s fixed pitches.

There are lots more possibilities, of course! If you’re focused on creating a great tone while blending and tuning to what you hear, you’ll see good results in your sound almost immediately.

You can visit my website or my blog for more information as I post it, or contact me anytime.

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