



Tune In: How to Avoid Being Flat or Sharp



Playing in tune is one of the hardest feats for new musicians, because their ears are not yet trained to hear the difference in flat, sharp, or neutral notes. However, it is one of the most easily recognizable problems to an untrained audience and can make or break a performance. Because of this, it is important to tune before each playing session, since each time you assemble your flute, the head joint is in a slightly different position. In this lesson, you will learn what tuning is, different ways to tune your flute, and how to hear the difference yourself.

Tuning

Playing in tune means that the frequency of a specific note you play matches the frequency of that note on another, equally tempered scale. For the flute, that usually means matching the sound of a note to a piano playing that same note. The problem new students run into when tuning is that tuning to just one note is useless. Just because one note of one scale is played in tune does not mean that all the other notes in that scale will also be in tune.

When tuning, if you find yourself playing flat or sharp, it is easiest to first check your breath support. Play the note again, making sure that you do not let the sound wilt away as you lose breath. If the instrument is still not in tune, remember this saying: "flat push in, sharp pull out." You can adjust the intonation of your flute by adjusting the head joint of the instrument. If your sound is flat, push the head joint in slightly and try again. If your sound is sharp, pull the head joint out a little and tune again until you achieve the desired sound. Once you find yourself in tune, make a mental note of the head joint position. Try to put your flute together next time keeping that position in mind, and you will spend much less time tuning your flute each session.

There are several things to remember when tuning your instrument. Remember to check a variety of notes and adjust the head joint to fit the majority of them. Often times, tuning is a compromise. You must

pick the position that gives the best sound to the greatest range of notes. Tune how you play. If you tune with a relaxed embouchure or while sitting down, you will likely not be producing the sound you expect to give while rehearsing for your next performance. Finally, remember that pianos, xylophones, and tuners are usually out of tune with themselves. However, for performance pieces with piano accompaniment, it is essential that you sound in tune with the piano, no matter how out of tune it sounds with itself!



Methods of Tuning

I have already touched on several ways to keep your flute in tune, including the piano and a tuner. A piano is an easy way to tune yourself, but it works best with a partner. Having an instructor strike a note on a piano, you can imitate that sound until you achieve harmony with the instruments. You can also tune yourself on a piano, memorizing the sound you hear from the piano and recreating it in your own instrument. Check several times to ensure that you are getting the desired sound.

A tuner is a portable way to check your tuning, measuring your sound against a preprogrammed norm. When you set the tuner to a particular note and play that note yourself, it checks the frequency of your sound against the established correct frequency of that note. When you reach the desired sound, the tuning needle will read straight up or a light will turn on, depending on the tuner you own. Tuners range in price from \$20 to \$200, and can be lightweight and portable or heavy and stationary. Check online or at your local music store for the brand and price range that suits your needs.

Hearing the Difference Yourself

One of the most useful skills a musician can develop is the understanding of harmony. Though it may seem like magic that a musician can strike a note on a piano and know that her flute is out of tune, it takes listening skills, an understanding of harmony, and lots of practice. Practice playing a note on the piano and repeating it on your flute, checking for inconsistencies in the sound. When you play both instruments together, only one sound should be heard. If you can tell where the flute sound ends and the piano begins, your instrument is out of tune. Make slight adjustments each time, memorizing the sound

of the piano in your head and letting it fill your mind as you play the same note on your flute. If your instrument is flat, it will sound lower and heavier than the piano; if it is sharp, it will sound shriller and higher than the piano. With plenty of concentration, keen listening abilities, and practice, you will soon hear the difference between yourself and your tuning instrument and be able to make minute adjustments-like magic!