

STRING INTONATION

Kristin Herkstroeter
Viewpoint School
Calabasas, CA

Intonation is often the first thing that receives comments and critiques when one hears a string group perform. Despite such attention, string groups with intonation problems are found at every level from beginning to advanced players. What can we, the string teacher, do to help improve our students' intonation? Listed below are some suggestions gathered from research and my experiences.

1. **POSTURE:** In order to play in tune, string students need to hold their instruments correctly. It is generally true that string students who look good also sound good. Teachers should address posture issues during every lesson and class meeting, especially to the beginning student, so that bad habits do not have the opportunity to develop.
2. **FINGER MARKERS:** Finger markers help to serve as a guide for the beginning string player. Bergonzi (1997) found that students' intonation improved with the use of finger markers. Research shows that without finger markers string students guess whether they are playing correct pitches or not. Spending time practicing incorrect pitches requires students to later go back, relearn where to place their fingers correctly, and retrain their ears. As students' ears develop and students advance, the finger markers should gradually be removed.
3. **LISTENING:** All string students should be actively involved in listening activities. One example of such an activity, usually performed during warm-ups at the beginning of class includes "my turn, your turn". Students imitate pitches and rhythms that the teacher models. Walking around the room and behind students during this activity helps to prevent students from being able to look at the teacher's fingers and forces them to listen closely to the instructor. This activity also provides a wonderful opportunity to review old concepts and introduce new ones.
4. **USE OPEN STRINGS:** To help develop a sense of pitch, students should learn to use their open strings as a guide to find the other pitches on their instrument. Beginning students should begin to learn how to match notes that are in unison and octaves with the open strings of their instrument.
5. **PRACTICE SLOWLY:** Without instruction most students will just play through their pieces a few times without focusing on improving any specific points or problem areas. Slow practice can help to improve students' intonation. It provides students with the chance to listen carefully to the pitches they are producing and provides them with the opportunity to fix their intonation. Teachers should spend class time teaching students how to practice including slow practice.

STRING INTONATION (cont.)

6. **RECORD YOUR STUDENTS:** Some students are so involved in the complex process of putting down their fingers, moving their bow, reading music, playing with rhythmic accuracy, and holding the instrument correctly, that they end up not listening closely to the sounds they are producing. Having students listen to a recording of their own playing can act as an eye-opening experience for students, and sometimes produces miraculous results.
7. **HAVE YOUR STUDENTS SING:** If students can correctly vocalize a pitch, they are much more likely to reproduce the correct pitch on their instrument.
8. **TALK ABOUT INTONATION:** Make sure even your youngest and most inexperienced students understand intonation. Explain the definition of the word “intonation” and have your students tell you which note(s) in a passage are out of tune and how to correct them.
9. **BE A ROLE GOOD MODEL:** Research (Rosenthal, 1988) shows that good modeling is an effective tool in training our students to master their own musical selections. Play the violin, viola, cello, and bass for your students. Make sure you are playing well in tune, using good posture, and producing a pleasing sound. When you are playing the violin or viola walk around the room so that all students can observe and hear you up close. If you are not a string player, take a few lessons to improve your own skills and increase your comfort level.
10. **HIGH STANDARDS:** Your students will only play as well as you expect them to. Make sure your students understand that you expect them to play in tune and always hold them to a high standard.

Playing in tune is among the most difficult aspect of playing a stringed instrument. It is our responsibility as string teachers to provide our students with all the tools we have to help them master this complex task.

References:

Bergonzi, L. (1997) Effects of finger markers and harmonic context on performance of beginning string students. Journal of Research in Music Education 45 (2) 197-211.

Rosenthal, R (1988) Effects of different practice conditions on advanced instrumentalists' performance accuracy. Journal of Research in Music Education 36 (4) 250-7.