



Developing Intonation In Small Ensembles

By Michael Levine

Ensemble playing is teamwork in every respect – not only in rehearsing and performing concert music, but also in developing good fundamentals. Sports teams don't just play games, they spend a great amount of time working together on drills. Similarly, we in the Dallas Brass find it valuable to spend part of every rehearsal (usually 20-30 minutes) working on the basics.

Many ingredients go into music making: style, accuracy, rhythm, intonation, dynamics, articulations, tone quality, blend, etc. Each can be worked on in a drill format, however, this article will focus on *intonation – the art of playing in tune*.

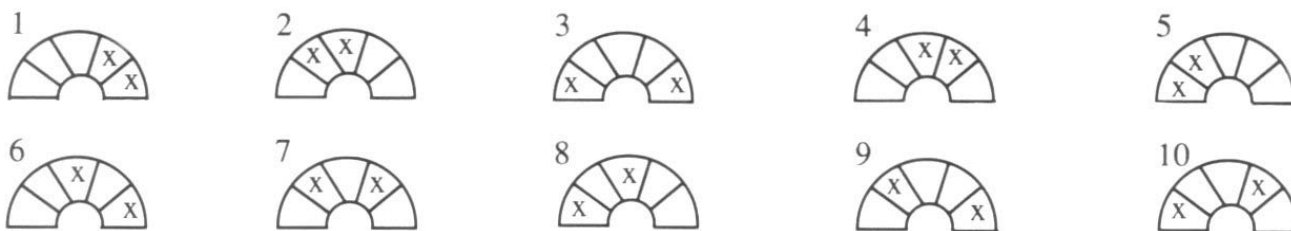
Good intonation in an ensemble is dependent on the ability of each individual to adjust quickly. This process should be as instinctive as that of driving a car on a straight road. Constant minor adjustments are necessary in order to keep the vehicle from veering one way or the other, but it becomes so natural that the driver is generally not aware that adjustments are being made at all. As brass players, we must fine tune each and every note we play. We can't rely on the instrument despite the fact that we've adjusted the appropriate tuning slides. Ultimately, we must rely on our ears. The better the ear, the faster one is able to adjust (be it by *lipping* a note, moving valve slides, etc.). Therefore, intonation work is essentially *ear training*.

Here are some of the exercises we do in the Dallas Brass. Make up your own, too. Do them in *all keys*. Vary tempos, articulations and dynamics. Experiment. Be inventive.

GROUP UNISONS. This is one of the first things we all did in 5th grade band and it's still beneficial. Have the whole group play a scale or arpeggio in unison/octaves. Go through all the keys successively, following the circle of 5ths (Bb, F, C, G, D, etc.). Also, play melodies or etudes in unison.

PEDAL POINT. Start by having the whole group play a middle or low register Bb. One at a time, have each person play a Bb scale – major, minor or chromatic – while the others sustain the Bb pedal. Go slowly, listening carefully to each interval. Choose a new key each time. (This is also an excellent exercise to do individually with an electronic tuner as the pedal point. It is recommended to amplify the tuner by patching it into a sound system – even a “jam box” will suffice.)–

CYCLE OF PAIRS. In developing group intonation it is helpful to work with the smallest possible group - *two* players. In a quintet there are 10 such combinations, which we call the Cycle of Pairs:



Following are some exercises using the Cycle of Pairs. Once again, remember to do them in a different key each time.

A. LONG TONES (unison/octaves)

Start with the first pair. Both players should play a Bb whole note starting in a comfortable range. If practical, begin with unisons, otherwise octaves. Listen carefully to match the pitch. Even if it sounds okay, try moving slightly one way or the other to make sure you've got the best match. Also try to match volume and intensity as a good blend depends not only on intonation, but balance as well. When everything lines up, the two sounds essentially blend into one new sound (like mixing two colors to get a third color). The next pair then plays the same note. Continue through all the other pairs as shown. After the 10th pair everyone should play the whole note together. At first it may seem a little confusing as to who plays when, but after going through the cycle a few times it should become easy to establish the routine.

B. PATTERNS (unisons/octaves)

Following are a few ideas of patterns to do in pairs. Ideally, these exercises should be done *without* reading music – all concentrating should be on *listening*.



C. REPERTOIRE

The Cycle of Pairs can also be applied directly to your ensemble's repertoire. Choose a passage where everyone has a part to play. Each person plays when it's their turn in the cycle. This helps increase awareness of the other parts which can be very beneficial for playing in tune. Also, try this exercise with 4-part chorales. Robert King Music Company publishes a book of 22 Bach Chorales transposed for brass, or use a church hymnal which has hundreds of chorales from which to choose. Try having each pair play the same phrase. Also, try each pair playing consecutive phrases, as shown:



When doing intonation work it is important to be very deliberate, taking time to fix each out-of-tune note before moving on. At times it is also good to keep going, paying close attention to what is out-of-tune, fixing what you can but moving ahead. This latter process is essentially what goes on during a performance. Stay relaxed and be patient. This sort of work can be tedious at times, but the benefits are well worth the effort.