



ORCHESTRA

How to Teach Your Students to Tune Using a Clip-On Tuner

by Sarah Duffy

Teaching your string players how to tune their own instruments is a major timesaver in your rehearsals. Young students are so excited to learn how to turn their fine tuners, and it makes them feel very professional and accomplished when they are able to successfully master this skill.

However, the tasks of selecting and purchasing tuners, organizing them, maintaining your supply, and actually teaching your students how to use them can be quite daunting.

Below you will find some ideas to help you get started. The chart includes tuners that were recommended in various posts in the School Orchestra and String Teachers Facebook group. These are tuners that are used and liked by at least some of our colleagues across the US (and beyond), so it is a good way to narrow down the field since there are so many models on the market.

There are a lot of tuning apps and console tuners available, too, but this article will focus only on clip-on models. (But, if you are looking for a fabulous app that works well in a noisy room, check out Tonal Energy—well worth \$3.99 in the app store.)

Teaching your students to use a tuner

I start this process by establishing a few ground rules with my students. One, they should use only their fine tuners and they should only make small adjustments. I ask them to bring the instrument to me if the note name registering on the tuner is different from the string they are trying to play. Two, they need to check that they are playing on the right string and turning the correct tuner. This is very important and helps avoid many failed tuning attempts.

Then, I instruct the students that they should pluck or bow while they are turning the fine tuner. No guessing is allowed. They need to listen carefully and know where they are headed.

The final ground rule is: When in doubt, *stop!* I try to instill confidence in them that they can tune themselves, but a healthy dose of caution is very helpful. Some students are terrified of breaking a string, so I remind

them that strings can easily be replaced. However, it is also important to teach them to be careful.

Once we have established the ground rules, we spend some time discussing sharp vs. flat. There are two very fun apps that teach these concepts. One is Blob Chorus, \$0.99. The students select which blob sang the same pitch as the King Blob. As students increase in skill, you can add more blobs to the “chorus.” My students love to play this game.



The other game is In Tune, \$0.99. The goal is to identify which pitch is higher or lower with the smallest possible interval. It is fun to set up a friendly competition between classes to see which class can get the best score. The interface isn't necessarily “fun,” but students enjoy this game.



In Tune: Level 1—32% of a half step
 Level 3—9.4% of a half step
 Level 4—4.13% of a half step

Once the students understand the difference between sharp and flat, we move on to what to do in either of those situations. We discuss “righty-tighty” and “lefty-loosey,” and clockwise vs. counter-clockwise.

Next, it is time for the students to practice turning their fine tuners. I ask them to make their A string just a little bit flat as a first step. Once they are all flat, they turn around and bring them back up to pitch. I usually turn on a drone A for this step.

The final step is to actually use a clip-on

tuner. I teach them how to attach the tuner, and I explain how things will appear on the screen. I like tuners that have a multi-colored display with a dial of some sort. That type of interface seems easier for students to understand. I remind the students to always turn off their tuner when they are finished so we don't waste the batteries.

Congratulations! Your students are now on their way to musical independence, and their skills will continue to develop over time. You have saved yourself countless hours of rehearsal time by investing in teaching this process early on.

Clip-On Tuners

Snark Tuners

In my classroom with 4th and 5th grade students, I use Super Tight Snark Tuners. I love the Snark tuners because they are readily available at music stores or on Amazon, they are reasonably priced, and they come in some nice colors. Students like to use them. They are easy to clip on the instrument, especially violin and viola. The dial is easy to read and the tri-color display is a key feature. Depending on your model, red = flat, yellow = sharp, and blue (or green) = in tune.

There are a few potential downsides to the Snark. One, the rubber pad on the clip falls off very easily. This can be fixed with some strong glue under the pad. Two, the prongs can break if a student turns it the wrong way or if it suffers from a hard drop.



Broken Snark

Instructing students on how to carefully handle the tuners is essential. I've only had two break in two years, but it's certainly a potential concern when you are investing a lot of money in a tuner supply.

Lastly, they aren't ideal for cello or bass. They often have a hard time picking up the low strings, and the angle of the tuner when it's clipped on the bridge can be awkward. I am planning to purchase some SHAR Neons or D'Addario Eclipses for my cellists and bassists next year.

Overall, though, I'm very happy with

the Snark tuners and I definitely recommend giving them a try.

Batteries

Almost all of the tuners listed below use flat CR2032 batteries. You can purchase them in bulk on Amazon (\$0.41 each) or search some out at the dollar store. Keep plenty of extras on hand and be sure to instruct your students to turn off their tuners when they aren't in use.

Storage

Now that you have your supply of tuners, what is the best way to store them? Some teachers clip the tuners on music stands and collect them into a basket at the end of the day. This is quick and easy, but it's hard to keep track of any wayward tuners.

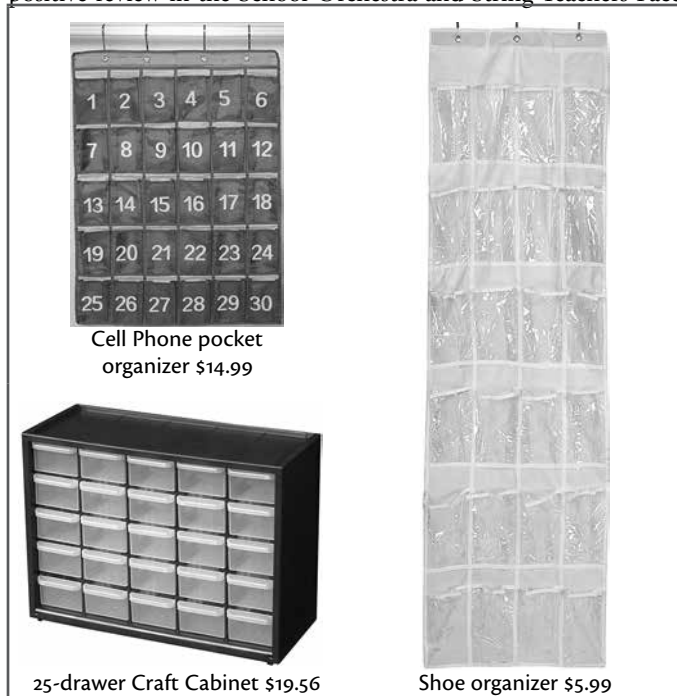
If you would like to number your tuners and assign them to stands or particular students, search for a cell phone pocket organizer on Amazon. The option pictured is \$14.99, but there are many different options available online.

A more economical version is an over-the-door shoe organizer, readily available at any discount store or on Amazon. The version pictured is \$5.99 on Amazon. This could work well if you don't plan to number your tuners.

Some teachers use plastic craft boxes, tackle boxes or tool boxes. The craft cabinet with 25 drawers pictured is \$19.56 on Amazon. It would be easy to add numbers to the drawers if you want to use numbers, and this could work well in a space where you can't hang one of the pocket organizers. Try searching "craft cabinet with drawers" on Amazon to find many more options.

Tuner Models

All of the tuners listed in the table were referenced with at least one positive review in the School Orchestra and String Teachers Face-



by an existing member. If you would like to be added, feel free to reach out to me on Facebook.

Thank you also to Angela Harmann at orchestrateteacher.blogspot.com. Her articles on teaching beginners how to tune provided some inspiration for the ideas mentioned above. <http://orchestrateteacher.blogspot.com/2017/04/how-to-teach-your-beginners-to-tune.html>

If you use clip-on tuners with your students, what is your favorite model? Do you have any additional tips or tricks? Feel free to reach out to me with any ideas you might have: sarah.duffy@moundsviewschools.org

Sarah Chelgren Duffy currently teaches 4th and 5th grade orchestra at Turtle Lake Elementary School in Mounds View Public Schools. She began her career teaching orchestra, grades 4-12, in Robbinsdale Area Schools, and then she was the orchestra director at Edina High School for six years before joining the team in Mounds View. Sarah was a member of the GTCYS conducting staff from 2006-2012, and she is a past-president of MNSOTA. ♪