

Is the Flute an Out-of-Tune Instrument?

— A Look at Intonation

Historically, flutes have had a reputation for poor intonation. From Italian Baroque conductors calling the flute “incurably out of tune,” to traditional Japanese singers complaining it’s hard to sing with flutists — this stereotype spans cultures and centuries.

Even modern flutes, despite improvements, remain technically challenging instruments in terms of pitch. High notes tend to go sharp, low notes flat, and adjusting the headjoint can create imbalances across registers.

Beginners and Intonation

For beginners, maintaining good intonation is difficult, because it requires **a stable embouchure, breath support, and relaxed body use** — all of which take time to develop.

In ensemble settings (school bands, chamber music), it’s important from the start to listen vertically (chords, harmonies), while in solo playing, one must be careful not to let emotional expression push notes out of tune.

Practicing with Intonation Awareness

- Sing the phrase slowly and check your intonation at the piano.
- Practice with basso continuo or drones (recordings work too).
- Play with **smooth slurs** and listen carefully to intervals.
- Especially in Baroque music like Bach or Telemann, wide leaps and exposed harmonies make pitch awareness critical.
- Slurred passages also help develop **embouchure flexibility** and ear training.

Flute players should train their ears to “feel discomfort” when pitch drifts — this is an important musical instinct.

Vibrato: Expression or Danger Zone?

Vibrato adds emotional depth, but using it incorrectly — especially with throat tension (the so-called “trembling” vibrato) — results in unstable tone and lack of control.

There are two types of students: those who can't produce vibrato, and those who use it unconsciously. In both cases, controlled vibrato must be **trained deliberately**.

- Start with **abdominal strength exercises (from my method)**
- Listen to professional flutists and mimic their vibrato styles.
- Don't overthink at first — vibrato often comes naturally after solid tone control.
- Avoid constant, involuntary vibrato — it should be expressive and optional.

Recommended methods include:

- **Trevor Wye Vol.4 (Tone and Vibrato)** for intermediate–advanced players.
- **Koizumi Hiroshi's “30 min daily basics”** for beginners and school flutists.

Vibrato is like seasoning — the right amount at the right moment makes all the difference.