Guitar Tuning Devices - An Overview

**Pitch Pipe** - Has six small pipes, which are tuned to each of the six strings of the guitar. You blow each note and match the string pitch to the pitch pipe.

**Tuning Fork** - A small fork which when struck produces pitch to tune one string of the instrument. From this note the rest of the guitar is tuned using the 5th string method or something similar.

**Electronic Tuner** - Electronically senses the pitch (with a microphone or input jack) and uses a needle or LED lights to indicate when the note is on pitch. There are three types of electronic tuners—the Guitar Tuner, the Automatic Guitar Tuner and the Chromatic Tuner.

The Guitar Tuner is the least expensive. To tune a string you change a switch to the string you are tuning. If the string is not yet in the range of that note the tuner will not register. The Automatic Guitar Tuner will change automatically without having to change a switch. It also will not register if the note is not in range. The Chromatic Tuner changes automatically and indicates which note you are closest to. You can then tune the string up or down to the appropriate note.

Which Tuner To Recommend?

**Pitch Pipe:** *Advantages* - Inexpensive, small & portable. *Disadvantages* - Will go out of tune over time, especially if blown too hard, relies on matching pitch by ear.

**Tuning Fork:** *Advantages* - Inexpensive, small & portable, accurate (does not go out of tune). *Disadvantages* - Relies on matching pitch by ear, tunes only first note, difficult to hear (helps to put on the bridge of the guitar after struck).

**Electronic Tuner:** *Advantages* - accurate, easy to use, good for training ears to distinguish pitch because of immediate feedback, can plug in an electric guitar and tune in high noise places, quick and reliable. *Disadvantages* - $$$, needs battery.

Training The Ear For Tuning

Unless one learns to play an instrument as a young child there is no experience in our growing up that trains us to distinguish small differences in pitch, nor is this skill necessary or useful for most non-music people. Because of this it is very difficult for most people to use any method to tune the instrument that relies on the ability to match pitches to another string or tuning device without confirmation that it is accurate. It would be a little like learning math by doing difficult problems without anyone telling you if the answer is correct.

Electronic tuners provide immediate feedback and are the best and fastest way to learn to tune the guitar (short of a professional musician with highly trained ears standing over you constantly telling you if you are on pitch or not; objectively and without judgment). The Chromatic Tuner is the easiest to use since it tells you what note you are on and allows you to get to the note you are tuning.

Tuner Calibration

For hundreds of years composers and conductors have tuned their orchestras to A440. In recent years however European conductors have insisted on A442 for a little brighter tone. Electronic tuners simply give us the option of tuning to one frequency or another, A440 all the way to A444.
There are a number of factors to consider when choosing a guitar for the student including: how old are you (the student) and how big? What type of music do you want to play? Do you want to play with other? Is the student a brand new beginner or have some experience?

With that in mind, here is a checklist run a potential guitar through that would make it student worthy:

☐ Is the size appropriate for the age and size of the student (see chart on next page)?

☐ Does the guitar have a reasonably low “action”, or height from the fret board? Strings will be easier to press down with a low action. Usually 1/8 to 3/16” is about right. Electric guitars generally have lower action than acoustic guitars.

☐ Do the strings buzz when played? Preferably by a competent guitarist (i.e. friend, teacher, etc.) The strings may buzz also because a student doesn’t have their fingers in quite the right place.

☐ Does the neck of the guitar straight or is it bowed badly? A very slight upward can be fine if it’s even across the neck. Back bow is not good.

☐ Do the tuning keys turn smoothly?

☐ Does it sound like the kind of music you want to play when played by a competent guitarist?

☐ Is the guitar of a sufficient quality to support learning and “inspire” the student to want to play more when they play something correctly?

☐ Is the guitar structurally made well enough to hold up over time?

☐ How does it feel when you hold it? How heavy is it? It is likely to be somewhat awkward because you are new, but compare it to other guitars.

☐ Do you like how it looks? Try to be honest. For some people this is very important and may decide if they will practice or not.

☐ Does the guitar have metal or nylon strings? How much pain are you willing to endure?