How to Tune Your Violin

As you probably know the violin has four strings and they are tuned, moving from right to left, to G D A and E. G being the thickest string and E being the thinnest.

When the violin was first invented the strings were made from animal sinew, often known as catgut. Gut strings are quite stretchy and as a result the strings can be tuned just by using the pegs at the end of the violin.

Most modern student violins use steel strings, these are not at all stretchy and tuning them just using the pegs is really quite difficult. Just a degree or two of turning at the peg changes the pitch of the string quite a long way and it is very difficult to be really precise with a peg.

The answer is the fine adjuster, which you will find on the tailpiece. Most Student instruments use a tailpiece with the fine adjusters built into it (integrated).

Some better quality modern strings use a nylon or synthetic core. This has some of the stretchiness of gut strings but retains the pitch stability of steel strings (they stay in tune well). This means that they can be tuned without fine adjusters but most people seem to use them anyway.

The usual method of tuning the violin is to tune the A string first and then adjust the other strings until they are also in tune. If a string is way out of tune then it is usual to adjust it with the appropriate peg until it is approximately in tune and then finally bring it up to tune using the adjuster. If a string is fairly close to pitch then just using the adjuster will be fine.

It is important to realize that the tailpiece is held at the bottom of the violin with the tailgut. It can pivot or move from side to side depending on how tight the strings are. This means that as you adjust each string the tailpiece will move and apply different forces to the other strings. So if you bring the G string up to pitch you can expect that the D, the A and E string will change pitch. So tuning the violin is a series of steps gradually getting each string to the correct pitch knowing that the change you made on one string might have an effect on another string. You just keep working round the strings until they are all in tune.

Just a word about tuning pegs. The pegs are cut with a taper and fit into a tapered hole in the pegbox. In order for the peg to grip and not slip you will sometimes not only have to turn the peg but also push it in sideways so that the peg is pushed into the taper. It's all a compromise, push it in too hard and it won't slip but it might be very hard to turn. Don't push it in hard enough and it will slip as soon as you let go of it.

If you find a peg is really stiff it pays to back off or de-tune the string and then bring it up to pitch. Backing the peg off releases the grip on the peg and most people find it easier to tune up to a note rather than down to one. If you just force a tight peg without backing off you do risk breaking the peg in the hole.

Now to what to tune to :-

You will hear many experienced violinists asking for a note of A. They then tune their A string to this note by comparing the pitch of the string with the instrument playing the A note. Once they've got that string in tune they tune the D by comparing the two strings. The two strings are a fifth apart and the beat between the two notes is very noticeable. Once the D is in tune then they tune the G to the D, again a fifth apart and lastly they tune the E to the A string. Bearing in mind what we said earlier about the tailpiece moving it's not unusual for the violinist to ask for the A again just to check that their A string is still in tune.

For beginner players this method is quite difficult as it needs a fairly well developed ear. It might help to begin with if someone can play the individual notes on the piano and then you can tune each string to the appropriate note. Some purists will frown at this because the notes on the piano are ever so slightly different from the notes on the violin, all to do with tempered scales, you can look it up on the internet. But for most people it's close enough.

If you haven't got access to a piano you can substitute pitch pipes or even use one of the new electronic tuners. We have one variety that clips onto the violin bridge so you can even tune up successfully in quite noisy environments.

The important thing if you are a beginner is to take your time and take care, it's very easy to over-tighten the E string in particular and before you know it you've got a broken string.

Just a couple of extra things to watch for. As you tune the strings it is possible that the top of bridge will move in the direction of the string. This can result in the bridge tilting over and if things get too severe actually falling over with a great clatter leaving you shocked and holding a piece of wood with strings curling off in all directions. Don't worry it seldom damages the violin and it's usually fairly easy to put it back together again. If you see your bridge tilting then do check with your teacher or a luthier, it takes a second to put it right and once you've been shown the knack you can do it yourself.

Lastly when you screw the fine adjusters in to tighten the string watch out that you don't screw them down so far that they press into the top of the violin, damaging the varnish and maybe even the wood itself.

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