

04. Tuning The Banjo

Tuning a musical instrument is really easy if the instrument has only one variable however banjos have a number of variables all of which directly effect the tuning.

The variables that effect tuning the banjo include:

- The mechanical security of the banjo's components.
- The tightness of the banjo head.
- The placement of the bridge on the head.

Steps:

1. Verify the mechanical security of the instrument if you aren't sure ask for help. First verify that the tension rod inside the neck (if equipped) is not loose. If it isn't or you aren't sure how to adjust it ask an experienced person to check it for you. Then check that the head is properly tightened (see the note regarding banjo heads) and if there are rods inside the banjo tub make sure that they are not loose. Test that the string tightening pegs are not loose and feel secure. If they are loose sometimes you can use a screwdriver to tighten them or they may need replacing. If you aren't sure about any of these "banjo mechanics" you need to talk to someone that can help - one simple mistake can be catastrophic especially with the neck tension rod.
2. Make sure the head is properly mounted and evenly tightened. If you lightly tap the head about an inch from the edge all the way around it should sound the same and feel tight. If not make sure that all the bracket nuts are evenly tightened.
3. Correct placement of the bridge is critical and if it is off even just little bit it as you play up the neck it be out of tune. The easiest way to place the bridge is to tune the first string using a tuner then press the string down at the twelfth fret and it should be the same note but one octave higher. If it's pitch is higher move the bridge a little toward the tail piece and repeat tuning, testing and moving until the pitch is exactly one octave higher. If the pitch is lower use the same procedure moving the bridge toward the neck. Once the 1st string bridge setting is correct repeat the process on the 4th string swinging the end of the bridge under this string one way or the other being careful not to move the other end of the bridge.

The method that I use to set the bridge utilizes the harmonics (chimes) of the strings. It's not easy to describe in print so if you wish to use this method you should talk to someone that uses it. It involves listening for the second harmonic of a string or the "chime" at the "one octave" (12th) fret location up the neck.

Once the three steps above have been taken the instrument should only require occasional minor tuning using a clip-on tuner and a slight tweaking of the tuning pegs. If you are having problems with tuning your instrument you should ask an experienced player for help.

When playing in a band tuning can be more involved and requires tuning to a note that the entire band has tuned to (usually a "Bb") and more than likely is a bit off key if a piano is not in tune. In this case ask the pianist to play the note of your 1st string then tune the 2nd string using the first string as the reference and continue tuning the remaining strings, third, forth, etc.. until all are in tune with the first.