

A More Practical and Accurate Way to Tune the Classical Guitar

It's been said that classical guitarists spend half their time tuning their instrument, and the other half of the time playing out of tune. Tuning a nylon-string classical guitar can be an exercise in frustration as you attempt tuning to octaves, tuning from 5th fret on one string to the adjacent open string, and so on.

The tempered tuning of the guitar allows music to be played in different keys without retuning for each key (exceptions: purposely altered tunings, such as lowered E string to D, lowered A string to G, lowered high E string to D, etc.), but compromises in intonation are the price we have to pay for this tempered, "standard" tuning.

Here's a method shown to me by one of my teachers that represents the most satisfying ("most satisfying" = closest to perfect, but not quite there) method for tuning a classical guitar.

1. First, using an electronic tuner or tuning fork, tune the 5th string to A440 (your reference point).
2. Fretting the 5th fret of the 1st string (low E), tune this note with the open A (5th) string. Check by fretting the 7th fret of the A string with the open E string and adjust the E string only.
3. Tune the 2nd (B) string with the 2nd fret on the A (5th) string. Check using the 5th on the open E string (7th fret) and the open B string. Also check using the open low E string with the 5th fret of the B string (high E note).
4. Tune the A note of the 2nd fret of the 3rd string to the open A (5th) string. Check using the 3rd fret of the 1st string (G) against the open 3rd string (G). Now use a D5 chord to check all the strings you have tuned thus far. Low to high, the notes in the chord are A-A-D-A, on the 5th, 3rd, 2nd, and 1st strings.
5. Tune the 4th interval between the 4th and 5th strings, changing only the pitch of the 4th string. Check the open 4th string against the D note (3rd fret) on the 2nd string as well as the E note on the D string (2nd fret) against the open 1st string (open E). Use a D5 chord to check the intonation of all the strings, now adding the 4th string open D into the chord.
6. Tune the low E string against the E on the 7th fret of the A string. Check it with the E note on the D string (2nd fret) as well as the open 1st string E.
7. Using an E5 chord (low to high: E-B-E-B-B-E), check the intonation of all the strings, make any adjustments your ear hears. Remember to NOT adjust the A string – that's already been aligned to A440 as the reference pitch.

This tuning system uses only 5ths and octaves to tune the guitar and doesn't just rely on one or the other. IMPORTANT: when checking how "in tune" the guitar is using a chord, never use a chord with a 3rd in it. Thirds are notoriously out of tune sounding on the guitar; if you tune to a chord with a 3rd in it, you will be further out of tune. Using the power chord tuning method (E5, D5) offers the best hope of approaching "perfect" intonation.

I have discovered this tuning method works great for pieces of music that have you playing in the 1st through 5th positions. When performing music that has you working in higher positions, tune to the E5 power chord in the 7th position (low to high: E-E-B-E-B-E, with the 6th, 2nd, and 1st strings open), and remember to only adjust those strings other than the A (5th), which is your reference string.