

Historical Tuning – An Overview

Pythagorean

Most common until Renaissance (through the 15th century)

Tuned as a succession of stacked pure (3/2) fifths

or alternate 3/2 fifths and 4/3 fourths

Excellent pure fifth and fourth, poor thirds (major is sharp, minor is flat)

Limited ability to modulate

Meantone

Most common in Baroque and early Classical periods (15-18th centuries)

Modifies a few pure intervals (fifths) to improve others (thirds)

Some fifths are reduced by a portion of a comma

Most keys are unaltered

Pure major thirds, decent minor thirds, poor fifths

Some keys sound great, some unusable

Well-temperament

Most common in Classical and Romantic periods

Almost no pure intervals, if any

Intervals adjusted (tempered) so that all keys are useable, though some sound better than others

Preserves key colors

Allows unlimited modulation

Equal temperament

Known since antiquity (in China) or at least the 17th Century (Europe) as a theoretical idea

Only actually possible beginning in early 20th Century

All semitones are exactly equal

Does not preserve key color

Allows unlimited transposition