

Buying a Ukulele

There may seem to be a lot to think about when choosing a Ukulele, so we have put together a few helpful pointers below to help you out. These notes are targeted at the raw beginner and could be titled "what I wish I'd known when I bought my first uke". Later on you will form your own opinions and may like to contribute to this document.

General information about ukuleles:

Ukulele sizes - Soprano, Concert, Tenor and Baritone

Ukuleles come in 4 main sizes, from the smallest, the Soprano (about 21 inches long in total), to the Concert (23 inches), Tenor (26 inches) and then Baritone (30 inches). Further reading will also reveal the bass ukulele and tiny sub soprano sizes.

The Soprano is considered the standard size for ukuleles. It usually has 12 to 14 frets. There are 2 types of tuning: C tuning, which is GCEA or D tuning, ADF#B. The C tuning is the most popular.

The Concert is a little larger, allowing for a bigger sound, and usually has a larger fingerboard, with around 14 to 17 frets (sometimes more). It is usually tuned to gCEA.

The Tenor ukulele is larger again, has 17 to 19 frets, so more scope for playing solos and different chords. Many guitarists prefer the Tenor models. Again, it is usually tuned to gCEA, although out of all the ukulele sizes, perhaps the tenor lends itself best to "Low G" tuning (GCEA - see below).

Baritone ukuleles are closely related to the guitar, and being the largest ukuleles, have a bigger, fuller sound. Baritone ukes have around 19 to 21 frets and are tuned like the top 4 strings of a guitar: DGBE.

Different Ukulele Shapes

Ukuleles come in a range of different shapes, including the standard guitar shape (sometimes called the figure 8); the pineapple (no curves); and the cut away (where the body is "cut-away" near the fingerboard to allow better access to the frets). Risa electric and solid ukuleles, and the Ohana Vita, add a whole new range of shapes and design to the ukulele world.

Types of Wood used to make Ukuleles

Ukuleles are made from a range of wood; koa, mahogany, spruce, cedar, maple...

Koa is a native Hawaiian wood and offers a bright, punchy tone, and is very beautiful to look at. Many Hawaiian ukulele makers consider koa to be the best wood for ukuleles. However, good quality koa is hard to find and expensive.

Mahogany wood offers a warm, rich tone. The classic Martin ukuleles of old are probably the most famous of all mahogany ukuleles.

Spruce is popularly used for guitars and is now commonly used for ukuleles too. Ukuleles are often made with a spruce top (front) but with the back and sides made from a different wood, for example rosewood.

You may also find ukuleles in maple, mango, cedar, cherry wood...all sorts of wood. During the 50s and 60s there were many ukuleles made from plastic.

Apart from the looks and tone, a lot will depend on what you want to spend. A koa ukulele will invariably be more expensive than one made from plywood.

More specific advice:

What size uke should I buy?

The songs which are generally played in the SUJ and the Beginners and Improvers group tend to fit best to a soprano, concert or tenor ukulele. A lot of songs depend on a strong strumming rhythm. As ukulele size increases the "sustain" increases (length of time a note rings on the instrument). Soprano and concert ukuleles tend to be better for delivering a short staccato rhythm and probably are the best size to start with. Tenor ukuleles can be a little louder and are a good size if you are interested in finger picking styles.

Small novelty sub soprano and baritone instruments are best avoided as a first instrument.

Solid Wood or Laminated / Ply?

You might see a ukulele that is "laminated" or made from "ply" wood. Put simply, this is a uke made from a cheaper wood, covered or laminated in a nicer looking wood such as mahogany.

A ukulele made from **solid wood**, or at least with a solid wood top, will nearly always give a brighter tone than a uke made from ply. Also, rather predictably, solid wood ukuleles tend to be more expensive.

How to tell the difference? This can be tricky but the edge of the sound hole may show whether the top is solid or ply.

Ultimately if you like the sound this doesn't really matter for a first instrument.

Banjo style ukuleles?

As with banjos, the banjo ukulele is designed to be very loud and to be heard without electronic amplification. Good instruments tend to be relatively expensive. As such it is not a particularly good choice as a first instrument for playing at the Jam or Beginners group.

Geared Tuners or Tuning Pegs?

Ukuleles come with geared, side-mounted tuners, or with rear-mounted, friction tuners. The friction tuners are considered to be more traditional, although many ukulele players like the control that geared tuners offer.

Due to the fact that friction tuners need to be of high quality to work properly and even then are much more difficult to adjust than geared tuners, friction tuners are best avoided on a first instrument.

What makes a ukulele "playable" ?

The "action" of a stringed instrument has a great effect on playability. The action is the term used to describe the way that the strings are set in height over the fretboard. It's a fairly complicated issue and is set by the nut (plastic or bone piece over which the strings run close to the tuners), the angle of the neck to the body of the instrument and the height of the bridge (plastic or bone strip over which the strings run on the top of the

ukulele body). Additionally, the protrusion of the frets over the fretboard have some impact. On a good instrument this is set up by hand.

A well set up ukulele will need little effort to hold down the strings whilst not buzzing when a chord is played. On low cost ukuleles the action is as it comes off the production line and some variation can be expected between samples of the same instrument.

A good thing to do is to look at an expensive ukulele and compare it to the one that you might want to buy. If the strings are very high above the fretboard on the low cost instrument compared to a more expensive unit then beware.

What's a simple test of playability?

Before you go out to the shop look up the positions of the chords C, Am, F, and G7. Take a chord diagram with you. Play the chords in that order giving four simple downward strums on each chord. Don't worry about changing chords quickly, just listen to the sound and compare it between instruments. Compare how easy it is to hold down the strings. This test should tell you a lot of information about the instrument. You could equally ask the assistant to play the chord sequence slowly for you on each instrument, that will give you the sound quality but you will tell a lot more about the action if you do it yourself.

A second important test is to play each string open (not pressed down), then play it at the 12th fret. You should get exactly the same note but 1 octave higher. If it sounds complicated it's not, just give it a try. Some instruments can be way out if set up or manufactured badly.

Finally it's worth bearing in mind that if the shop assistant can play reasonably well, they will be able to make almost any ukulele sound good by showing off with some fancy quick chord changes. So it's definitely worth playing the C, Am, F, G7 chord progression yourself if you possibly can.

What makes a ukulele sound good?

The "voice" of a ukulele is derived from the wood or other material from which the body is made and the strings. Many

people at the SUJ favour the use of Aquila strings, which are available in specific packs for each size of ukulele. They are not cheap (about £7, Jan 2010) but can dramatically improve the sound of a low cost ukulele strung with factory strings. Others prefer Worth strings as giving a brighter sound and being better suited to fingerpicking

How much should I spend?

At the time of writing (January 2010), you can buy a basic soprano ukulele for about £20 – £30 and buy a playable instrument. The Makala Dolphin bridge ukulele range are a very good choice in this price range and offer exceptional value.

Some cheap ukuleles are real junk in this price range, so be very careful. The advice to “try before you buy” is worth bearing in mind before committing to an internet purchase (I wish I had!).

As price increases, the general quality of ukuleles gets better, becoming more playable and better looking. In very general terms, once you get to about £150 - £200 and above you should find a very good instrument and increasing cost will just provide a better looking ukulele.

Ukuleles are available to a very high price and are likely to be hand-finished, specialist instruments. Once you have played for a while you will know what you want and until that time a purchase in this price range does not really make sense.

Where should I go to buy my ukulele?

Most music shops currently will carry a small range of ukuleles. Possibly the best range of ukuleles which can be found in the south of the UK is offered by the Southern Ukulele Store in Boscombe, Bournemouth (<http://stores.shop.ebay.co.uk/Southern-Ukulele-Store/contactus.html>). Prices are understood to be competitive but it is always worth making an online comparison if possible. (You may even be able to negotiate an SUJ discount). However the “try before you buy” advice should be adhered to because examples of the same product will vary, particularly for low cost instruments.