

BUYING YOUR FIRST UKULELE

Where can I get a decent ukulele? What kind of ukulele should I get? How much should I spend? These questions keep coming up, so some detailed discussion is warranted.

There are three big questions when choosing an instrument of any kind: does it sound good, does it play well, and does it appeal to me? If you get one that meets all of these criteria, you will be a happy camper and have years of enjoyable playing ahead, regardless of the price paid. What to look for when choosing a good ukulele? Neck angle, string action, and intonation are all important.

There are several price points for ukulele. The general recommendation is that you should spend somewhere around \$75 - \$100 for a decent starter instrument. Cheaper ukes are often just not very good instruments, and cause problems. While an experienced player can make almost any junky instrument work, do you really need that handicap when you are just learning? That \$15 painted "hula girl" uke you bought at the Honolulu airport is a souvenir. It is a ukulele-shaped piece of art, and was never meant to be played, only hung on the wall as a decoration.

Spend \$50 and you might soon be looking for a nicer instrument, as your playing ability and taste grows with experience. Spend \$150 and you will be satisfied for quite a long time, and have a good second ukulele for the beach if you get an expensive one later. Spend \$250 and up, and you will have a lifetime instrument that you will probably never outgrow as either a player or as a performer.

Some people buy cheap at first, to see if they are going to stick with it before investing significant money. That is understandable, and OK. But remember that a nicer instrument will always be nicer, long after the money spent has been forgotten. Nicer instruments have better set-ups, prettier wood, are more fun to play, sound better, and are just more inspiring overall. Many a new player has been turned off music completely because they had a cheap instrument that was difficult to play or just did not sound very good.

Kala, Lanikai, Makala, Fluke / Flea, Cordoba, and some Oscar Schmidt instruments are good entry level and intermediate ukulele. (The quality varies on the Oscar Schmidts. Some are quite nice, but many have a relatively poor set-up to start with. That can usually be fixed for \$35 - \$50).

The only decent quality cheap ukulele that we know of is the "Makala" brand soprano uke, selling locally for around \$40. They are painted in several bright colors, with a cute smiling dolphin as a bridge. Not expecting very much from them, it was surprising to find that most examples sound pretty good and play decently. And replacing the factory strings with a better grade of string will help. Good strings include the Worth Fluorocarbon, Aquila Nylgut, or Ko'olau Gold strings.

Ukulele with a lot of abalone and decoration are fancy looking, but can be poorer quality instruments than some plainer ones. The decoration looks cool, but does not add anything to the tone. Think about it. If you only have four hours of labor and \$40 in materials available to build a ukulele that sells for \$150, spending half of that time adding fancy decoration means less time for quality woodworking and assembly. The cost of that abalone or pearl inlay also comes out of the total material budget, so you have to use lower grades of wood, cheaper tuning machines, etc. One of the best Hawaiian makers there is, Kamaka, builds fairly plain but superb quality instruments using very good wood. They sell for \$900 and up, depending on the model and type of wood.

The ukulele needs to play in tune with itself, and this is called intonation. If the intonation is off, you can tune the open strings to sound right, but when you fret a chord it will be out of tune. Or you can tune so that the chord is right, but then the open strings will be off pitch. No matter what you do, it will never sound in tune overall. To check intonation, the note fretted at the 12th fret on each string should sound the same pitch as the 12th fret harmonic. Often they are noticeably different. This usually means that the bridge is not quite in the right place, so the string length and the frets do not line up correctly. This is not an easy problem to fix, and involves removing and re-gluing the bridge in the correct position. If you don't know how to make a harmonic tone, have one of the guitar playing staff in the music store demonstrate for you. Or let someone show you how at one of the BUG meetings.

Neck angle is important. The neck and fingerboard have to be at the correct angle relative to the top of the uke, otherwise the string action will be too high or too low. By "action", we mean the height of the strings above the frets. Too low, and they buzz when you play, especially if you strum vigorously. Too high, and it is harder to fret the note or chord, plus the strings have to bend further and tend to go noticeably "sharp" --

higher than the intended pitch. When you sight down the neck, the plane of the frets should line up with the bottom of the saddle (the white part that the strings rest on) and no lower than the upper one-third of the wooden bridge. If necessary, use a ruler or straightedge to check this. If the fret surface points at the bottom of the bridge or into the sound board, the neck angle is too steep. The strings will be too high to start with, and the problem will only get worse with time. Some compensation can be made by lowering the saddle, but only to a point. If the saddle gets too low, the strings will buzz around the 12th fret when vibrating. The overall tone can also be degraded because there is less down-force on the saddle.

String action is the one thing that can be easily adjusted after the ukulele is built. The nut slots can be filed slightly deeper to lower the strings near the peghead, and the saddle can be raised or lowered to adjust string height on the other end. If you go too low, you have to make a new nut or saddle and start all over again with the fitting process. It takes a little experience and finesse to get the action right.

What about solid wood versus laminate? Laminated wood – plywood – is a less expensive material often found on lower priced ukes (under \$150). Laminated wood is strong and stable, and is not very sensitive to humidity or temperature changes. But because the laminated wood is so stiff, its ability to vibrate and its tone suffer somewhat. A uke made from laminated wood will sound exactly the same 20 years from now. Manufacturers sometimes go to great pains to hide the fact that the top is laminated, so it can be hard to tell just by looking. It does not matter as much if the back and sides of the ukulele are laminated. Solid wood on the top is more important for tone.

Solid wood is generally of higher quality and more expensive, usually found on instruments in the \$200 range and up. After the instrument is played for a year or two, the sound “opens up” or improves. The wood fibers in the top vibrate with play, and they can move more freely with time. The tone and volume can improve, sometimes dramatically. But solid wood needs to be kept at the right temperature and humidity to prevent cracks in the top or the body. Basically, treat the instrument the way you would treat a child or a pet. Don’t leave them in a hot car in the summer, or in a cold car in the winter. Avoid extremely wet or dry situations. Your uke will be uncomfortable anywhere that you are uncomfortable.

Do I buy mail-order or go to a local store? It is a good thing to support local stores whenever possible, because you want them around if you need to buy strings, accessories, get repairs, or even buy other ukes. Plus you get to actually see and play the instrument. Decent ukulele are available in the Boise area at Dorsey Music, Welch’s Music, and Dunkley Music. Mail-order usually brings better prices and far more selection. The drawback to mail order is that you don’t get to see and play that particular instrument. Make sure that you can return the mail-order uke if it is not acceptable, but be prepared to absorb the shipping charges. Some on-line places to check are: www.elderly.com, www.fleamarketmusic.com, www.ukuleleworld.com and www.ukes.com.

There are four basic ukulele sizes: soprano, concert, tenor, and baritone. Soprano is the smallest and gives the most “traditional” ukulele sound. Concert size is the next largest, and usually has a bigger, fuller sound and more room between frets. Tenor ukes are bigger still, and are favored by players with large hands and fingers. Tenor ukulele are available in either high-G tuning, or low-G tuning on the fourth string, which just uses a different gauge of string. The other three strings are exactly the same either way. Low-G tuning is probably better if you are playing scales and lead melodies. High-G tuning gives a more traditional ukulele sound when strummed.

Baritone ukulele is like a small guitar, and is tuned like a guitar -- different than the other sizes of ukulele. If you play the baritone uke, you cannot watch another uke player’s hand and use the same chord shape they are holding. Baritone has a lower-pitched and very full tone, and adds to the overall audio mix in a group. With the right set of strings, a tenor ukulele can be tuned like a baritone too.

It all comes down to personal preference. The right choice is whichever size feels best to you, has enough room for your fingers to be comfortable on the fretboard, and gives the sound that you want.

Summary

Your new ukulele should pass the three big tests:

- it plays easily and in tune
- it sounds good to you
- it appeals to you visually and is otherwise fun