

Ukulele Basics

These notes include general information and advice for teachers, parents and carers. They have been organised into the following sections:

- Notes for parents/carers
- Notes for teachers
- Finger aerobics
- Singing and playing
- The audio tracks

Notes for parents/carers

Thank you for supporting your child while they learn to play the ukulele. Ask them to show you what they have learned at regular intervals to encourage their progression. The ukulele won a Guinness World Record for being the easiest instrument to learn, so why not try learning to play alongside your child? You don't need to have played an instrument before to learn to play the ukulele, and you'll find it a great bonding experience. Please read the 'Notes for teachers', below, for more detailed tips and ideas.

Notes for teachers

Ukulele Basics and its included repertoire can be used for whole-class instrumental tuition as well as for small groups and one-to-one tuition. Please refer to these notes for general teaching tips at each stage. For more detailed lesson plans for selected songs, as well as a variety of supporting resources, visit the *Ukulele Basics* page on fabermusicstore.com.

Stage 1

- Ukuleles are tuned to the notes G, C, E and A. When holding your ukulele in playing position, the G string is nearest to your nose and the A string is nearest to your knees. The lowest string is C, the second string down. Listen to track 1 to hear how the strings should sound. If you aren't confident about tuning, you may wish to use an electronic tuner.
- If you are teaching with the aid of a smart board, you can extend the introduction to the ukulele by showing its geographical origins using google maps. (The ukulele's predecessor – an instrument called a Machete de Brage – arrived in Hawaii aboard a ship from the island of Madeira. See if the children can locate Madeira and Hawaii on a map of the world.)
- Hold up your ukulele and ask your student(s) to imagine legs and arms as shown in the illustration. See if they can guess the names of some of the parts of the ukulele; they will probably be able to find the 'body', 'neck' and perhaps even the 'ears'.

Stage 2

- If you play down the strings with your thumb, their note names are G, C, E and A. Strings also have a number, counter-intuitively from knees to nose: 1, 2, 3, 4. String 1 is known as the 'top string'.
- It is important to spend some time learning about the concept of pulse. See if your student(s) can clap and say the words of the chant on page 7. Can they think of other sounds that have a constant, steady beat?
- *The Strings Song* is intended to teach the name and number of each string. This can be taught along with the ukulele introduction in lesson 1.

Stage 3

- This stage introduces strumming for the first time, so it is a good moment to discuss the idea of sounds being made up of single notes or of groups of notes (chords). Can the children hear the difference?
- Use the *Strum Song* to teach the children how to strum and pluck on the ukulele. This provides a good grounding for playing chords.

Stage 4

- The C chord is an easy introduction to playing chords. Show the children how to play this chord – make sure they use their 3rd finger to press on the A string and stress the importance of using the fingertip. Explain that we're toughening up our fingers and they will become stronger over time.
- Use the songs in this section to practise playing the C chord and reading chord boxes. Always check for 'dead strings' (see 'Dead string alert!' on page 10). Dead strings need to be checked for at each new chord-making stage.
- Some teachers and students may find it helpful to use stickers when introducing new chords to help with finger placement.

Stage 5

- 'Dead strings' are likely to be a problem when children first learn the A minor chord; this is because they have to reach their finger over the other strings. Ensure that the middle finger is up on point like a ballerina's feet so that no other strings are touched, and check that they are pressing down nice and firmly.
- Once they have mastered A minor, practise changing between C and A minor chords by doing some 'Finger aerobics' (see below).

Stage 6

- Two fingers are needed to play the F chord, so it is more important than ever to make sure that children press firmly on the strings with their fingertips. Once fingers are in position, play each string individually to check for 'dead strings'.
- In *Frère Jacques*, make sure children keep their fingers in place for the plucks at the end. See if they can remember their string numbers. This song is also a great opportunity for groups to play a round, which will help develop listening and ensemble skills.

Stage 7

- G chord is our first 3-fingered chord. It is worth spending time checking for dead strings and hand position.
- For 1st-finger strumming, it can be helpful to introduce words to play along to. We've used 'walk' and 'running' for the 'Running and strumming' exercise on page 20 as this has a natural link with the concept of crotchets ('walk') and quavers ('running'). Demonstrate how 'run' is the down strum and 'ning' is the up strum for quavers.

Stage 8

- Introducing the 3-chord changes will take time. Say the numbers 1 to 8 to a steady beat and ask the children to strum each chord in turn on number '1'. This will allow them time to position their fingers in preparation for playing the next chord. Decrease the gaps between strums as children become more confident.
- The 'Finger aerobics' rhythms will help familiarise everyone with different strumming patterns, including the pattern used in the songs on page 23.

Stage 9

- The transition from 3 to 4 chords in a song is a little bit easier. This will allow you time to focus on playing new repertoire and performing musically. It is also a good moment to review the musical concepts and terminology learnt so far. Try doing some 'note sums' with crotchets, quavers and minims.

Stage 10

- Waltz time provides an opportunity to put musical learning in its historical context. You may wish to show video footage of a waltz dance, and perhaps listen to a well-known waltz. Two contrasting examples of waltzes are 'Waltz of the flowers' from Tchaikovsky's ballet *The Nutcracker*, and *Delilah* by Tom Jones.
- Introduce the concept of 3/4 by clapping beat 1 and tapping beats 2 and 3 with your fingers in your palm. Explain that you're always clapping the 1st beat (the most important one) and ask the children to work out how many beats are in each group.

Stage 11

- Changing between the chords of D, G and A will be easier to achieve if you use the anchor method, as there are fewer fingers to move. This is explained in the 'Finger aerobics' box on page 30. It will seem tricky at first, but explain that it gets easier with practice. Start slowly and gradually speed up.
- Practise the two strumming patterns given in the 'Finger aerobics' box before playing *Clementine* (page 31) – this song is based around these patterns.

Stage 12

- The musical alphabet exercises are easier to teach in smaller groups using visual aids. However, picking melodies is an important area of ukulele learning and this stage could be used as extension activities for Gifted and Talented students in a group-teaching scenario.

Stage 13

- Children enjoy playing the blues – it has a familiar sound to it and is instantly appealing. Introduce the blues by playing some recordings of blues songs and explaining the music's association with the slave trade.
- *The Ukulele Blues* gives children the opportunity to play the standard '12-bar blues' pattern. A fun addition to learning would be for children to make up their own 'blues' words to accompany the chord pattern.
- *The Blu-ku-lele Blues* offers an introduction to improvising and can be a fun way to end a lesson. Don't expect perfection at this point: the objective is to understand music as a creative activity – something that can be made up on the spot! Track 53 gives an example of one improvised pattern using the notes of the blues scale. If children are struggling to use all the notes, they can still join in by using just the open strings.

Stage 14

- 'Playing by letters' means playing songs where just the words and the chord names are given. Lots of songs are written in this way on the internet, so it is useful to be able to read from this sort of score.
- If preferred, 'playing by letters' could be introduced gradually, from the time that children learn their first chord change.

Finger aerobics

'Finger aerobics' exercises feature throughout *Ukulele Basics*. They offer vital training for the fingers to make them stronger and quicker in order to achieve smooth and quick chord changes. Start slowly at first, and gradually speed up. Beginner players are like toddlers learning to walk: wobbly at first and only able to manage a step or two, but with lots of exercise and practice, soon strong enough to walk.

Try to do 'Finger aerobics' before every tune, practising the specific chord changes (and later strumming patterns) required.

Singing and playing

Ukulele Basics includes ukulele parts for lots of well-loved songs. The key of each song has been selected primarily with ukulele learning and development in mind; however, many songs sit comfortably within children's vocal ranges. The following songs can also be found on the Sing Up songbank, so you may wish to combine ukulele learning and vocal development using both resources.

Row, Row, Row your Boat

Hot Cross Buns

Frère Jacques (two versions)

London Bridge is Falling Down

Swing Low*

When the Saints Go Marching In*

I'm Gonna Sing*

Clementine

Waltzing Matilda

She'll be Coming 'Round the Mountain

*These three songs feature in Sing Up's *Gospel Medley*.

The audio tracks

- The CD includes the following types of tracks:
 - Demos (for all pieces)
 - Backings (for all appropriate pieces)
 - Technique tracks (to demonstrate tuning, plucks, strums, chords, dead strings, etc.)
- The clicks at the beginning of demos and backings mark the tempo that the piece will be played at. The backing tracks are designed for performance once children are secure with the music; always practise slowly first, then gradually speed up to play with the backing.