

7 Factors to Consider When Buying an 'Ukulele

A Guide for Women



Aiyana
'Ukulele

CONNECTING WOMEN
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What to Consider

It's exciting... you have made the decision to buy an 'ukulele.... you start looking... and what do you find? A huge range of sizes and prices, and even a few different shapes. It very quickly becomes overwhelming, as there is so much choice.

Does this ring a bell? Don't worry, we are going to explore all of the different factors to take into consideration when purchasing an 'ukulele. This information will serve you for your first instrument, and any upgrades that you may wish to make in the future.

The 7 different factors to consider when looking for your 'ukulele are:

1. Size
2. Shape
3. Wood
4. Price
5. Sound
6. Brand
7. Playability



1. SIZE

There are 4 sizes of 'ukuleles: soprano, concert, tenor and baritone.

Each one is progressively 2 inches longer than the previous size. Let's look at them individually.

i. Soprano

This is the smallest, original size (21 inches) and can be referred to as the 'standard 'ukulele'. It has the classic sound we associate with Hawaiian music, and is a good beginner's 'ukulele.

ii. Concert

This size also has a classic sound, albeit with a wider range of sound.

As it is bigger than the soprano, it has a bigger, deeper tone with more mid-range and low frequencies. This 'ukulele is also good for beginners, and may be preferred by women with larger hands.

iii. Tenor

Like Pavarotti, this 'uke is larger with a deeper, richer tone. While there is a lot more room for bigger hands, it can also be more difficult for women to learn on. Unless you already play the guitar and are comfortable with a bigger size, or particularly like the deeper, bigger sound, I personally would not recommend this for a first 'ukulele choice.

iv. Baritone

This is the grand-daddy of them all. It has the deepest sound, and is tuned differently to the other 3 'ukuleles. It is actually tuned like the first four strings of the guitar, and also sounds a bit like a small guitar, so it is easy to pick up for guitarists.

If you are playing along with other 'ukulele players, or following one of my courses, you will have two options if using a baritone 'ukulele:

1) Transpose all chords to a 4th higher (This is musical jargon, suffice to know it is by far the more difficult choice, and needs training to pull off), or 2) Place a little contraption called a capo at the 5th fret. Capos can be found at any music store, for around \$20. A baritone 'ukulele would be my last choice for beginners.

Size Recommendation

As you can see, I recommend women starting with a soprano or concert size. As you progress on your 'ukulele journey, you may find you want to have another 'ukulele for a different sound, or for different situations. Depending on your needs, you may wish to try out a tenor or even baritone further down the line.



2. SHAPE

'Ukuleles come in 3 shapes: The traditional figure 8 guitar-like shape is by far the most common. They can also come in a pineapple-shape, or a boat paddle shape, both which look as they sound. I think the shape is really personal preference and subject to availability. You will mainly see the figure-8 style.

3. WOOD

'Ukuleles can be made of plastic, which I understand are quite durable. I have in actual fact never played one, and personally prefer wood as the material of choice. I will discuss wood options here.

'Ukuleles can be made of laminate (several fine layers of wood glued together), solid wood, or a combination of both. Lower end 'ukuleles are made of laminate, and may have a veneer on top. Mid-range may have a solid top (the top of the 'ukulele most influences the tone of the instrument) and laminate back and sides. At the mid - to high-end, solid wood will be used throughout the 'ukulele. Solid wood 'ukuleles will mellow and improve with age (if well cared for). Higher end 'ukuleles tend to have a selection of extra features, such as inlay, binding, rosettes and other special additions that add beauty, quality and value.

Electro-acoustic 'ukuleles have the added option of being plugged in and amplified. This also adds cost, and is more suited to those who will be performing.

While not as good as solid wood 'ukuleles, laminate 'ukuleles can still have a lovely sound. They also tend to be stronger, and are less likely to split or crack in dryer climates.

'With solid tops, or all solid wood, there are many types and combinations of wood that can be used. Spruce and cedar for example have a brighter tonal quality, while woods such as mahogany, koa and acacia have a warmer sound. In solid wood 'ukuleles, you will generally see a combination of 2 woods, drawing on the qualities of both.

'Each wood also has different physical attributes; with colour, lightness/darkness and grain varying in different types of wood or even in a selected piece of wood. You may feel more attracted to certain woods. Ask the staff at your music store about the materials and their qualities.



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4. PRICE

'Your budget will largely determine what type of 'ukulele you can buy.

When looking at size, with all other factors being equal, a soprano 'ukulele will be the cheapest, quite simply because it uses the least amount of materials, and price will increase with each size for the same reason.

Laminate 'ukuleles will be the cheapest, solid top 'ukuleles are more costly and solid wood 'ukuleles are the most expensive. Any extras, e.g. mother of pearl inlay, will add more cost, as there is more outlay for materials, and more workmanship and hours involved in their fabrication.

I recommend avoiding the really cheap 'ukuleles, such as the painted colour ones. Quite frankly, they sound terrible and are hard to keep in tune. Leave them for smaller kids who will be using it more as a toy than an instrument and spend just that little bit extra. Believe me, it is worth it.

Here in Australia, I generally recommend my students spending no less than A\$65. As a rough indication, an acceptable laminate soprano 'ukulele will start around this price, and laminate concert size will start around A\$80. I have seen some great little 'ukes for these prices. (If you are from other parts of the world, you can get a rough idea by looking at the exchange rate of the Australian dollar with your local currency. You may need to take into account that the Australian dollar can fluctuate, and that shipping to Australia also adds to the price).

Some of my students choose to spend a little more, and start with a finer instrument. Again, this can still be quite economical (compared to other instruments). Here in Australia, I have seen some lovely 'ukuleles for around A\$150 - 250.

Of course there are some stunning instruments that you can spend over one thousand dollars for (and more!!). Once you have established that an 'ukulele is an important, ongoing part of your life, (and if you have the budget), by all means make the inversion in a top quality instrument. In this case, I would look in music stores, or consider getting a reputable luthier to custom-make one.

5. SOUND



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'The tonal qualities and resonance of an instrument can vary quite significantly, and how these appeal is very personal. I know we are in the online era, and many people successfully buy instruments they are happy with online. If this suits your time availability and buying preference, there is definitely an ease with this buying method. Personally, I like to be able to hear, feel and play an instrument. I am always saddened by closures of music stores.

If you are leaning towards supporting your local music store, I would definitely recommend listening to the instrument. Even if you just strum down on the open strings, you will quite often find that one appeals to you more than the others, even if you cannot define why. I have heard many students voice this opinion.

I also recommend asking someone at the store to play the 'ukulele for you, regardless of your playing ability. The difference in perspective will vary the tonal qualities and give you an additional sense if what you are hearing is to your liking (or loving!!).

A couple of years ago, I spent half a day driving from music store to music store in my closest city. I had intended to spend around A\$400 - 600, and even tried out some of the higher end instruments (A\$1000+).

All of the higher end 'ukuleles were absolutely beautiful, the projection and quality of the sound were impressive, however they were well above my budget.

What I was surprised to find, however, was that I personally was not hearing much of a difference in the sound if I were to spend a couple of hundred dollars, or four to six hundred! When I commented this to a salesman in one of the later stores I visited, he actually agreed with me.

This does not mean that the extra cost was not worth it in the quality of the instrument, it just shows that sound preference (which was the biggest factor for me) is completely personal.

6. BRAND

Quite honestly, there are so many brands out there that I could not even begin to recommend the best options, especially with the lower end 'ukuleles. Music stores tend to buy what is available at a good price in bulk, so what they might have had a couple of years ago may be quite different to what they have now. It really is a case of seeing what is available, and google reviews can give you a little more insight.

In the A\$150 - 250 dollar range I mentioned in the previous section, I have seen (in my classes) or personally had some lovely Kala, Lanokai and Cordoba 'ukuleles, but again, this list is by no means exhaustive. Alvarez, Fender, Gretsch... the list goes on.

Depending where you are in the world, you may have other options that are equal or even better.



7. PLAYABILITY

It is important for me to gauge how an 'ukulele feels in my hands, and how easy it is to play. So even if you are a beginner, I would recommend sitting down and resting it on your lap, and plucking or playing a few strings. If you know some basic chords, all the better. If you buy an instrument online, you will be unable to feel what it is like (unless you have access to the same 'ukulele to try out). You may be able to ask questions however.

The most important aspect of playability comes from the neck width and thickness. While this is more applicable for me with guitars (as they have much wider and thicker necks!), this factor can make a significant difference for some women, particularly those with smaller hands. A thinner-necked 'ukulele will usually be easier to play for a beginner, and also at a more advanced level, particularly when you begin to play bar chords. Once you are playing with more ease, you will notice how different some 'ukuleles can feel.

If further down the line, you are wanting to upgrade your 'ukulele, and you decide to buy a higher quality 'ukulele, you can request the music store to adjust the setup for your needs. They can adjust the height of the saddle or the bridge, and the angle of the neck. All of these factors will affect the height of the strings from the neck, and influence the playability for you.



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Putting This Information Together

You now have the most important factors to take into consideration when choosing an 'ukulele. If that feels like an overload of information for you, I am about to simplify things to help you find the right instrument for your needs.

Start with your budget and the 'ukulele size or sizes you are interested in. If you are just starting out, you do not need to splash out on a high end 'ukulele.

Once you have an idea of your price range and size, look at what availability is around you. Are there any local music stores? Do any of your friends have an 'ukulele? Try out or listen to their 'ukuleles. If you know any competent players who would be happy to help you with your purchase, then by all means get their help.

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I recommend checking out music stores. Secondhand 'ukuleles are another option. However, you may live in a more remote location, or not have easily accessible music stores near you. You may just prefer purchasing online, or wish to investigate all of the above! The choice is entirely yours!

Once you have a price range, and know where you are going to look, you will have an idea of what other factors you can take into consideration. If purchasing online, you may have to rely on reviews. It's a good idea to look at professional reviews from different sources to get an informed idea of what you are buying.

And one final recommendation... investing in a lightweight case to protect your 'ukulele during transportation, or when not in use, is well worth the additional cost.

All the best for your new 'uke!

