

Ukulele

The **ukulele** (/ˌjuːkəˈleɪli/ *YOO-kə-LAY-lee*; from Hawaiian: ˈukulele [ˈʔukuˈlələ], approximately *OO-koo-LEH-leh*) or **ukelele**^[1] is a member of the guitar family of instruments. It generally employs four nylon or gut strings or four courses of strings.^{[2][3]} Some strings may be paired in courses, giving the instrument a total of six or eight strings.

The ukulele originated in the 19th century as a Hawaiian adaptation of the Portuguese machete,^[4] a small guitar-like instrument, which was introduced to Hawaii by Portuguese immigrants, mainly from Madeira and the Azores. It gained great popularity elsewhere in the United States during the early 20th century and from there spread internationally.

The tone and volume of the instrument vary with size and construction. Ukuleles commonly come in four sizes: soprano, concert, tenor, and baritone.

Ukulele



Martin 3K Ukulele

String instrument

Classification	String instrument (plucked, nylon stringed instrument usually played with the bare thumb and/or fingertips, or a felt pick)
Hornbostel–Sachs classification	321.322 (Composite chordophone)
Developed	19th century

Related instruments

- Bowed and plucked string instruments, in particular the cavaquinho

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History

The ukulele is commonly associated with music from Hawaii where the name roughly translates as "jumping flea",^[5] perhaps because of the movement of the player's fingers. Legend attributes it to the nickname of the Englishman Edward William Purvis, one of King Kalākaua's officers, because of his small size, fidgety manner, and playing expertise. One of the earliest appearances of the word *ukulele* in print (in the sense of a stringed instrument) is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's *Catalogue of the Crosby Brown Collection of Musical Instruments of All Nations* published in 1907. The catalogue describes two ukuleles from Hawaii: one that is similar in size to a modern soprano ukulele, and one that is similar to a tenor (see § Types and sizes).^[6]

Developed in the 1880s, the ukulele is based on several small guitar-like instruments of Portuguese origin, the machete,^[4] the cavaquinho, the timple, and the rajão, introduced to the Hawaiian Islands by Portuguese immigrants from Madeira and Cape Verde.^[7] Three immigrants in particular, Madeiran cabinet makers Manuel Nunes, José do Espírito Santo, and Augusto Dias, are generally credited as the first ukulele makers.^[8] Two weeks after they disembarked from the SS *Ravenscrag* in late August 1879, the *Hawaiian Gazette* reported that "Madeira Islanders recently arrived here, have been delighting the people with nightly street concerts."^[9]

One of the most important factors in establishing the ukulele in Hawaiian music and culture was the ardent support and promotion of the instrument by King Kalākaua. A patron of the arts, he incorporated it into performances at royal gatherings.^[10]

Kamaka Ukulele or just Kamaka is a family-owned Hawaii-based maker of ukuleles, founded in 1916, that is often credited with producing some of the world's finest ukuleles, and created the first pineapple ukulele.

Canada

In the 1960s, educator J. Chalmers Doane dramatically changed school music programs across Canada, using the ukulele as an inexpensive and practical teaching instrument to foster musical literacy in the classroom.^[11] 50,000 schoolchildren and adults learned ukulele through the Doane program at its peak.^[12] Today, a revised program created by James Hill and J. Chalmers Doane continues to be a staple of music education in Canada.

Japan

The ukulele came to Japan in 1929 after Hawaiian-born Yukihiko Haida returned to the country upon his father's death and introduced the instrument. Haida and his brother Katsuhiko formed the Moana Glee Club, enjoying rapid success in an environment of growing enthusiasm for Western popular music, particularly Hawaiian and jazz. During World War II, authorities banned most Western music, but fans and players kept it alive in secret, and it resumed popularity after the war. In 1959, Haida founded the Nihon Ukulele Association. Today, Japan is considered a second home for Hawaiian musicians and ukulele virtuosos.^[13]

United Kingdom

British singer and comedian George Formby was a ukulele player, though he often played a banjolele, a hybrid instrument consisting of an extended ukulele neck with a banjo resonator body. Demand surged in the new century because of its relative simplicity and portability.^[14] Another British ukulele player was Tony Award winner Tessie O'Shea, who appeared in numerous movies and stage shows, and was twice on The Ed Sullivan Show, including the night The Beatles debuted in 1964.^[15] The Ukulele Orchestra of Great Britain tours globally, and the George Formby Society, established in 1961, continues to hold regular conventions.

United States mainland

Pre World War II

The ukulele was popularized for a stateside audience during the Panama–Pacific International Exposition, held from spring to fall of 1915 in San Francisco.^[16] The Hawaiian Pavilion featured a guitar and ukulele ensemble, George E. K. Awai and his Royal Hawaiian Quartet,^[17] along with ukulele maker and player Jonah Kumalae.^[18] The popularity of the ensemble with visitors launched a fad for Hawaiian-themed songs among Tin Pan Alley songwriters.^[19] The ensemble also introduced both the lap steel guitar and the ukulele into U.S. mainland popular music,^[20] where it was taken up by vaudeville performers such as Roy Smeck and Cliff "Ukulele Ike" Edwards. On April 15, 1923 at the Rivoli Theater in New York City, Smeck appeared, playing the ukulele, in Stringed Harmony, a short film made in the DeForest Phonofilm sound-on-film process. On August 6, 1926, Smeck appeared playing the ukulele in a short film His Pastimes, made in the Vitaphone sound-on-disc process, shown with the feature film Don Juan starring John Barrymore.^[21]

The ukulele soon became an icon of the Jazz Age.^[22] Like guitar, basic ukulele skills can be learned fairly easily, and this highly portable, relatively inexpensive instrument was popular with amateur players throughout the 1920s, as evidenced by the introduction of uke chord tablature into the published sheet music for popular songs of the time,^[22] (a role that

would be supplanted by the guitar in the early years of rock and roll).^[23] A number of mainland-based stringed-instrument manufacturers, among them Regal, Harmony, and especially Martin added ukulele, banjolele, and tiple lines to their production to take advantage of the demand.

The ukulele also made inroads into early country music or old-time music^[24] parallel to the then popular mandolin. It was played by Jimmie Rodgers and Ernest V. Stoneman, as well as by early string bands, including Cowan Powers and his Family Band, Da Costa Woltz's Southern Broadcasters, Walter Smith and Friends, The Blankenship Family, The Hillbillies, and The Hilltop Singers.^[24]

Post World War II

From the late 1940s to the late 1960s, plastics manufacturer Mario Maccaferri turned out about 9 million inexpensive ukuleles.^[25] The ukulele continued to be popular, appearing on many jazz songs throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s.^[26] Much of the instrument's popularity (particularly the baritone size) was cultivated via The Arthur Godfrey Show on television.^[27] Singer-musician Tiny Tim became closely associated with the instrument after playing it on his 1968 hit "Tiptoe Through the Tulips".

Post 1990 revival

After the 1960s, the ukulele declined in popularity until the late 1990s, when interest in the instrument reappeared.^[28] During the 1990s, new manufacturers began producing ukuleles and a new generation of musicians took up the instrument. Jim Beloff set out to promote the instrument in the early 1990s and created over two dozen ukulele music books featuring modern music as well as classic ukulele pieces.^[29]

All-time best selling Hawaiian musician Israel Kamakawiwo'ole helped re-popularise the instrument, in particular with his 1993 reggae-rhythmed medley of "Over the Rainbow" and "What a Wonderful World," used in films, television programs, and commercials. The song reached no. 12 on Billboard's Hot Digital Tracks chart the week of January 31, 2004.^[30]

The creation of YouTube was a large influence on the popularity of the ukulele. One of the first videos to go viral was Jake Shimabukuro's ukulele rendition of George Harrison's "While My Guitar Gently Weeps" on YouTube. The video quickly went viral, and as of April 2019, had received over 16 million views.^[31]

Construction

Ukuleles are generally made of wood, though variants have been composed partially or entirely of plastic or other materials. Cheaper ukuleles are generally made from plywood or laminated woods, in some cases with a soundboard of a tonewood such as spruce. More expensive ukuleles are made of solid hardwoods such as mahogany. The traditionally preferred wood for ukuleles is acacia koa.



1916 cartoon by Louis M. Glackens satirizing the current ukulele craze



Boy in Hawaii wearing lei and holding a Maccaferri "Islander" plastic ukulele

Typically, ukuleles have a figure-eight body shape similar to that of a small acoustic guitar. They are also often seen in non-standard shapes, such as cutaway shape and an oval, usually called a "pineapple" ukulele, invented by the Kamaka Ukulele company, or a boat-paddle shape, and occasionally a square shape, often made out of an old wooden cigar box.

These instruments usually have four strings; some strings may be paired in courses, giving the instrument a total of six or eight strings (primarily for greater strumming volume.) The strings themselves were originally made of catgut. Modern ukuleles use nylon polymer strings, with many variations in the material, such as fluorocarbon, aluminium (as winding on lower pitched strings),^[32] and Nylgut.^[33]

Instruments with 6 or 8 strings in four courses are often called taropatches, or taropatch ukuleles. They were once common in a concert size, but now the tenor size is more common for six-string taropatch ukuleles. The six string, four course version, has two single and two double courses, and is sometimes called a Lili'u, though this name also applies to the eight-string version.^[34] Eight-string baritone taropatches exist,^[35] and, 5-string tenors have also been made.^[36] A Javanese ukulele commonly has only three strings. It seems to be a modern innovation, as the first generation of three-stringed ukuleles were four stringed instruments with one string deliberately removed. They are now manufactured to have only three strings.

Types and sizes

Common types of ukuleles include soprano (standard ukulele), concert, tenor, and baritone. Less common are the sopranino (also called piccolo, bambino, or "pocket uke"), bass, and contrabass ukuleles.^[37] The soprano, often called "standard" in Hawaii, is the second-smallest and was the original size. The concert size was developed in the 1920s as an enhanced soprano, slightly larger and louder with a deeper tone. Shortly thereafter, the tenor was created, having more volume and deeper bass tone. The baritone (resembling a smaller tenor guitar) was created in the 1940s, and the contrabass and bass are recent innovations (2010 and 2014, respectively).^{[38][39]}

Size and popular tunings of standard ukulele types:



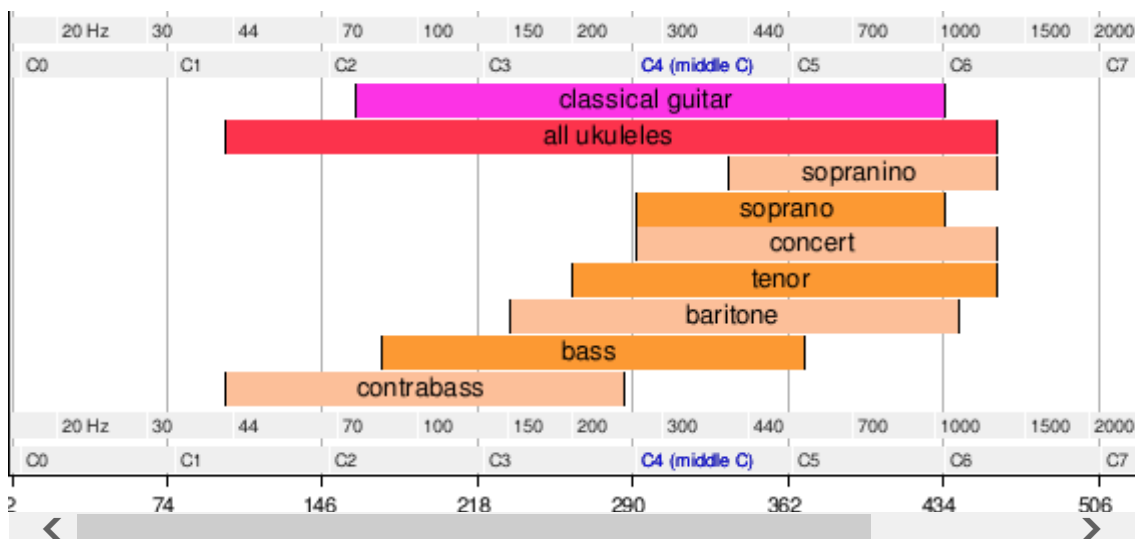
A modern red ukulele.



Soprano pineapple ukulele, baritone ukulele and taropatch baritone ukulele.

Type	Alternate names	Typical length	Scale length <small>[40]</small>	Frets	Range <small>[41]</small>	Common tuning <small>[42]</small>	
Pocket	piccolo, sopranino, sopranissimo	16 in (41 cm)	11 in (28 cm)	10–12	G ₄ –E ₆	D ₅ G ₄ B ₄ E ₅	
Soprano	standard, ukulele	21 in (53 cm)	13 in (33 cm)	12–15	C ₄ –A ₅ (C ⁶)	G ₄ C ₄ E ₄ A ₄ ^[43]	G ₃ C ₄
Concert	alto	23 in (58 cm)	15 in (38 cm)	15–18	C ₄ –C ₆ (D ^{♯6})	G ₄ C ₄ E ₄ A ₄ ^[43]	
Tenor	taro patch, Lili'u ^[44]	26 in (66 cm)	17 in (43 cm)	17–19	G ₃ –D ₆ (E ⁶)	G ₄ C ₄ E ₄ A ₄ ("High G") G ₃ C ₄ E ₄ A ₄ ("Low G")	A ₃ D ₄ D ₃ G ₃
Baritone	bari, bari uke, taropatch ^[45]	29 in (74 cm)	19 in (48 cm)	18–21	D ₃ –A ₅ [♯] (C ^{♯6})	D ₃ G ₃ B ₃ E ₄	
Bass ^[46]		30 in (76 cm)	20 in (51 cm)	16–18	E ₂ –B ₄ (C ^{♯5})	E ₂ A ₂ D ₃ G ₃	
Contrabass	U-Bass, Rumbler ^[47]	32 in (81 cm)	21 in (53 cm)	16	E ₁ –B ₃	E ₁ A ₁ D ₂ G ₂	D ₁

Range of notes of standard ukulele types:



Ukuleles in a music store.

Note that range varies with the tuning and size of the instruments. The examples shown in the chart reflect the range of each instrument from the lowest standard tuning, to the highest fret in the highest standard tuning.

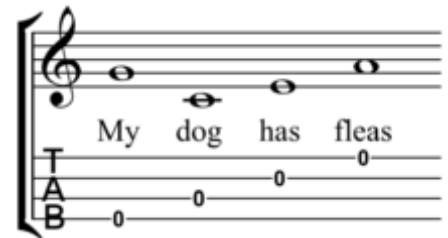
Tuning

One of the most common tunings for the standard or soprano ukulele is C^6 tuning: $G_4-C_4-E_4-A_4$, which is often remembered by the notes in the "My dog has fleas" jingle (see sidebar).^[48] The G string is tuned an octave higher than might be expected. This is known as a "reentrant tuning"; it enables uniquely close-harmony chording. A few players prefer "low G" tuning, with the G in sequence an octave lower: $G_3-C_4-E_4-A_4$, which is equivalent to playing the top 4 strings (DGBE) of a guitar with a capo on the 5th fret.



Ukulele C^6 tuning Play .

Another common tuning for the soprano ukulele is the higher string-tension D^6 tuning (or simply D tuning), $A_4-D_4-F\sharp_4-B_4$, one step higher than the $G_4-C_4-E_4-A_4$ tuning. Once considered standard, this tuning was commonly used during the Hawaiian music boom of the early 20th century, and is often seen in sheet music from this period, as well as in many method books through the 1980s. D^6 tuning is said by some to bring out a sweeter tone in some ukuleles, generally smaller ones. D^6 tuning with a low fourth string, $A_3-D_4-F\sharp_4-B_4$, is sometimes called "Canadian tuning" after its use in the Canadian school system, mostly on concert or tenor ukuleles, and extensive use by James Hill and J. Chalmers Doane.^[49]



"My dog has fleas" tuning. Play

Whether C^6 or D^6 tuning should be the "standard" tuning is a matter of long and ongoing debate. There are historic and popular ukulele methods that have used each.^[50]

The "higher pitched" instruments (sopranino, soprano, concert) most often employ reentrant tuning, while the "lower pitched" instruments (baritone, bass, and often tenor) usually employ *linear* tuning, where the strings are tuned from low to high pitch across the instrument. For example, baritone is usually tuned to $D_3-G_3-B_3-E_4$ (like the highest four strings of a standard 6-string guitar). There are, however, exceptions, with some players preferring to place the tenor (and even, rarely, the baritone) into re-entrant tuning as well.

One of the main tuning differences between a baritone ukulele and any other ukulele is that the G string is tuned down an octave. The baritone resembles more of a guitar tuning than any other ukulele. It is also common to see electric ukuleles tuned this way (even if they are not a baritone).

Hawaiian ukuleles may also be tuned to open tunings, similar to the Hawaiian slack key style.^[51]

Ukulele can be tuned like Dotara as well (a four string instrument played by the folk singers in India and Bangladesh) Ukulele can be tuned like Dotara in many patterns, but E-B-E-A is the easiest way to tune it as there are only two strings that need to be re-tuned.^[52]

Related instruments

Ukulele varieties include hybrid instruments such as the guitalele (also called guitarlele), banjo ukulele (also called banjolele), harp ukulele, lap steel ukulele, and the ukelin. It is very common to find Ukulele's mixed with other stringed instruments because of the amount of strings and the easy playing ability. There is an electrically amplified version, the electric ukulele. The resonator ukulele produces sound by one or more spun aluminum cones (resonators) instead of the wooden soundboard, giving it a distinct and louder tone. The Tahitian ukulele, another variant, is usually carved from a single piece of wood,^[53] and does not have a hollow soundbox.

Close cousins of the ukulele include the Portuguese forerunners, the *cavaquinho* (also commonly known as *machete* or *braguinha*) and the slightly larger *rajão*. Other relatives include, the Venezuelan *cuatro*, the Colombian *tiple*, the *timple* of the Canary Islands, the Spanish *vihuela*, the Mexican *requinto jarocho*, and the Andean *charango* traditionally made of an *armadillo* shell. In Indonesia, a similar Portuguese-inspired instrument is the *kroncong*.^[54]

Audio samples

See also

- [Cavaquinho](#)
- [Cuatro \(instrument\)](#)
- [List of ukulele musicians](#)
- [Machete \(instrument\)](#)
- [Stringed instrument tunings](#)

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