How to Play Campanella Ukulele

by Jonathan Lewis

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Introduction

Welcome to this short introduction to campanella ukulele. I've written it for people (hopefully like you) who have been playing ukulele for a while but would like perhaps to do more than just strumming chords.

People always smile when I tell them that I play ukulele, which is good because it's a fun instrument that many associate with good times, hula girls, and music hall entertainers like George Formby. But I'm on a mission to show the world that beautiful – and sophisticated – music can be made on this little instrument and I hope you'll join me. Campanella picking is for me what the makes the ukulele so special.

You'll learn some scales and easy tunes. The scales are to help you learn the fretboard and to show you that you'll need more than one place to play the same notes when working out how to play tunes the campanella way. Feel free to skip straight to the tunes if you want. I was never a good student when it came to theory so I won't be upset!

To use this guide, you should already be able to :

- Tune your ukulele – campanella needs accurate tuning or it will sound awful! Digital tuners are pretty cheap these days and there are plenty of free apps for phones and tablets too (I use Pitch Lab).

- Play a few chords (just the basic, first position chords, you'll start to learn the fretboard here).

- Read tablature. It's a lot easier than standard music notation and is better for fingerstyle and campanella because it clearly indicates where to put your fingers. You can find plenty of tutorials on the Internet.

- Play with your fingernails! You can play without them, but the sound is clearer, louder and crisper (is that a word?) if you have nails. Not too long, either, otherwise they'll be breaking all the time.

- Be willing to learn things for yourself through patience and perseverance. I don't make videos where I tell you things like, “OK now take your second finger and put it on the first string, third fret like this” and keep doing it for a whole song. If you want to get good at an instrument, there will come a time when your teacher can't mollycoddle you any more. Your musicianship will develop faster if you work from the tab and decide for yourself which is the best finger to use (left and right hand). As you will see from the scale practice in this book there is never only one way to play campanella so be big girl or boy and develop some autonomy. You'll thank me for this advice in years to come.

If you are a complete beginner, please head over to ukulelehunt.com and download the free e-book to get you started. Or consider buying Ukulele for Dummies – it's the comprehensive guide to all things ukulele. Come back to this guide when you can play a few songs. You'll find a list of other great resources at the end of the book.

The tabs in this guide were made with Guitar Pro 6 – possibly the best tab/music editor available. You might consider getting this excellent software so you can arrange your own pieces and hear how they sound, or experiment with the tunes here. When I'm arranging pieces in the campanella style, I often start by simply copying the tune in standard notation into GP6 then I start looking for the ideal fingering to transform it into campanella.

About Me

I've been a hobby guitarist for more than for thirty-five years and fingerstyle was always my favourite way of playing. I'd never given any thought to ukuleles – I considered them to be just toy guitars for kids (not knowing anything about Hawaiian music). But when a friend asked me to tune the ukulele she had bought for her son, I discovered this peculiar way of tuning it – re-entrant, or high-G. This was totally fascinating to me – I quickly figured out that you could get cool harp-like sounds by playing all of the strings one after the other. I had been using open tunings on the guitar so I already knew the 'harping' technique used by some of my favourite players, like Pierre Bensusan and John Renbourn but never knew just how pretty it could sound on this miniature guitar!

Moving on a few years and I finally get myself a uke – I wanted something small enough to take on vacation with me – and thanks to YouTube I find some tutorials by Tim Keough – ukuleletim is his username. There I learn that this 'harp' technique is called 'campanella', literally, 'little bell'. After reading this short book and trying some of the exercises, I recommend you head over to his page and try some of the arpeggio studies Tim wrote, they're fantastic! So that's me hooked on ukulele and campanella is pretty much the only thing I do these days.

I hope you will enjoy the book and learning some tunes. Please feel free to send me your questions and comments, and stay in touch with me via my YouTube channel or website.

warning:

In Britain, where I come from, ukulele is usually pronounced 'yoo kuh lay lee'. I understand that perhaps 'ookoolaylee' is a more authentic pronunciation but it doesn't sound natural with my British accent. So don't be surprised to see the indefinite article, 'a' – “a ukulele” – and not 'an ukulele'

Please subscribe to my YouTube Channel for more Campanella fingerpicking videos and tutorials

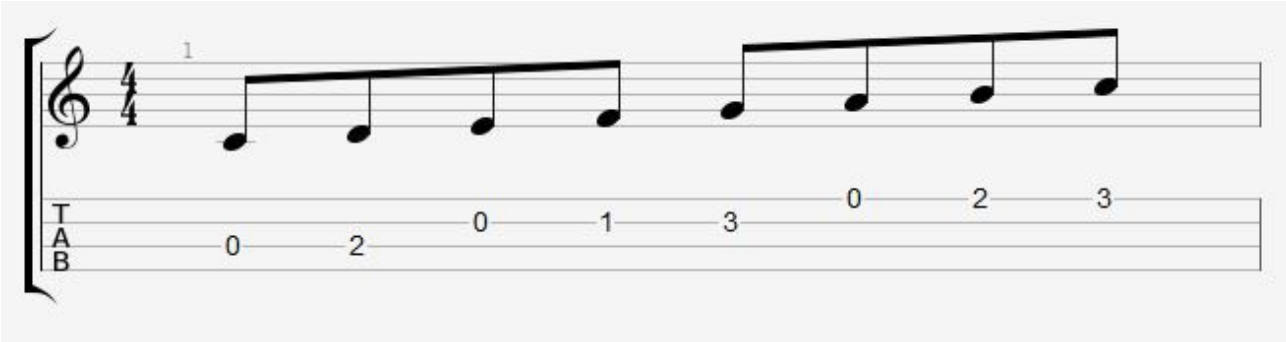
What exactly is campanella?

The word means "little bell" and that's the effect we're trying to get - when you hear church bells, one doesn't stop ringing before the next one starts - they all ring at the same time. The same for a harp. A harp doesn't have a neck where you can put your fingers to change the pitch of a string, so one string, one note. So campanella picking means avoiding playing two notes on the same string whenever possible, taking advantage of the re-entrant tuning (where the first and fourth strings are only one tone – two frets – apart). Using open strings as much as you can and alternating between strings rather than playing successive notes on the same string really does make the uke sound like a little harp.

Arranging tunes in campanella is challenging, but ukulele re-entrant tuning (high G) makes it possible. Most of the traditional tunes I've uploaded were first learned on other instruments (guitar, mandolin, whistle) so the first thing I do is figure out the tune on the uke anywhere (i.e. not campanella), then when I'm happy that the tune is accurate, I try to look for different ways to play it avoiding playing two notes on the same string.

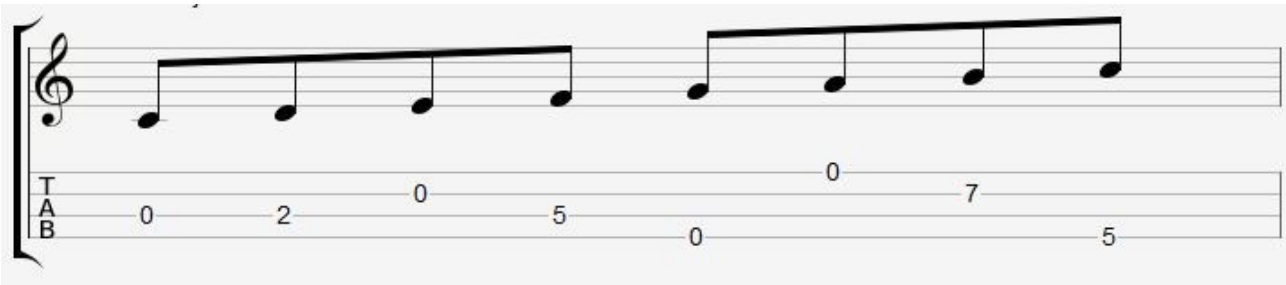
Wanna hear it what it sounds like?

Play a C major scale the “normal” way, like this: (use whatever fingers you like to pick, we'll get to right-hand techniques later.



Notice that we move up the scale in the conventional, linear way, moving up the strings one at a time while playing two or three notes on each string. When you change note on the same string you obviously have to stop the sound of the previous sound. Not so with campanella.

Now play it the campanella way. Careful, you have to go both up and down the strings:



Sounds better, doesn't it? That's because with the exception of the first two notes, C and D, which you can only play on the C string, you can always hear the previous note. There is a slight dissonance, but rather than being unpleasant, it makes you think of harps or bells – and that can be very satisfying.

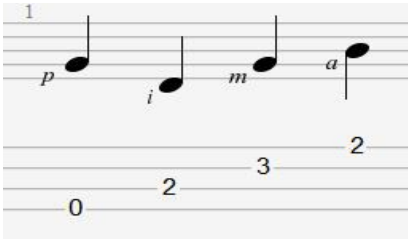
Right Hand Practice For Campanella Picking

The most important for campanella is to get that right hand moving. If you're only used to strumming, it's time to free up your fingers and thumb and start using all of them (well, not so much your pinky, but all the others). If you already know how to finger pick, you probably won't need to do these exercises, just skip to the scales and tunes later in the book.

In guitar music, we use numbers for the left hand, (1,2,3,4) and letters for the right hand. These come from Spanish:

P (pulgar) : Thumb
I (indice) : Index
M (medio) : Middle
A (anular) : Ring

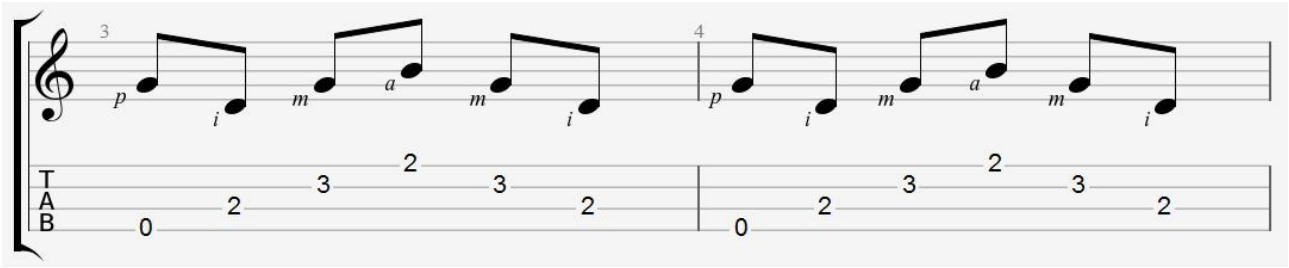
So you will see the letters next to the note on the standard notation, like this:



Exercise 1.

Start by placing your thumb on the fourth string (that's the one nearest your chin), your index on the third, your middle finger on the second and your ring finger on the first (nearest your feet), like this

Now play each string one after the other starting with your thumb (p)

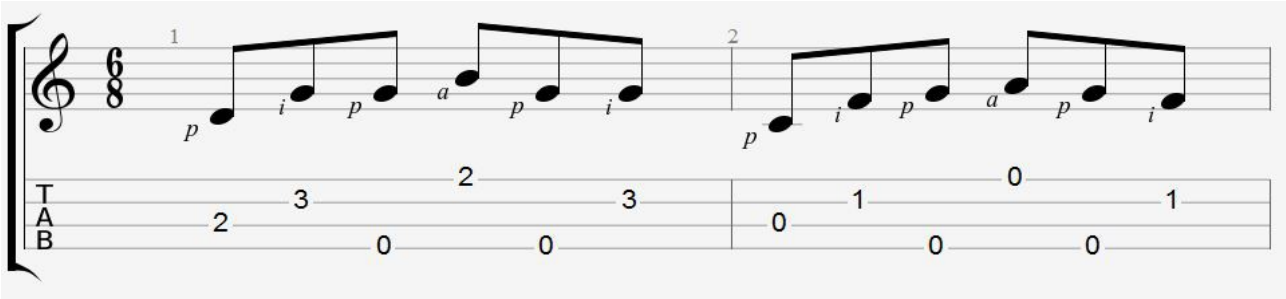


Do it over and over again until it starts to feel natural. When you can do it naturally, choose some other chords to play and practice those. Now you've a better a way to play some of your favorite songs! Playing chords this way isn't technically campanella, but this is how you start...

Exercise 2

Now, perhaps more importantly, we're going to learn the alternating pattern that you've heard millions of times in songs with acoustic guitar. The difference is that with a high G ukulele, the thumb isn't playing a bassline, it's an essential part of the melody. This is one reason many ukers shy away from campanella – they feel that fingerstyle must have a melody and an accompanying bassline. But anyone who has heard pieces by Bach for solo violin and cello will know that great music can be made with just four strings!

It's good to be flexible with your picking – the previous exercise rigidly sticks to a one string, one finger pattern but that's not always possible or desirable. So try this with the same G major chord (and a F add 9):



Try doing the same thing with songs you already know. If you'd like to do even more fingerpicking exercises, I made a video of different fingerstyle techniques using the same chord progression. There are some classical techniques that have nothing to do with campanella, but any practice is good practice!

paste this link in your browser if the video won't open: http://bit.ly/2dHWYAD

Scale Practice

1. Seven Ways to Play a C major Scale

I should say “seven ways to play the top half of a C major scale” - because the first four notes are always played the same way. The first two, C and D, are only possible on the third string as they are lower than all the notes possible on the other strings. Then, to make the scale campanella we can play the E on the second string, open then the F back on the third string, fifth fret.
By learning all the possible variations for the other notes, though, you will start to learn the notes in all positions on the fretboard and understand better how tunes are arranged in the campanella style. They are certainly not equal in terms of playability, practicality or musicality (no.4 is definitely the best way) but they could all come in handy when trying to find the best campanella fingering, so work your way through them, up and down as shown in the video.

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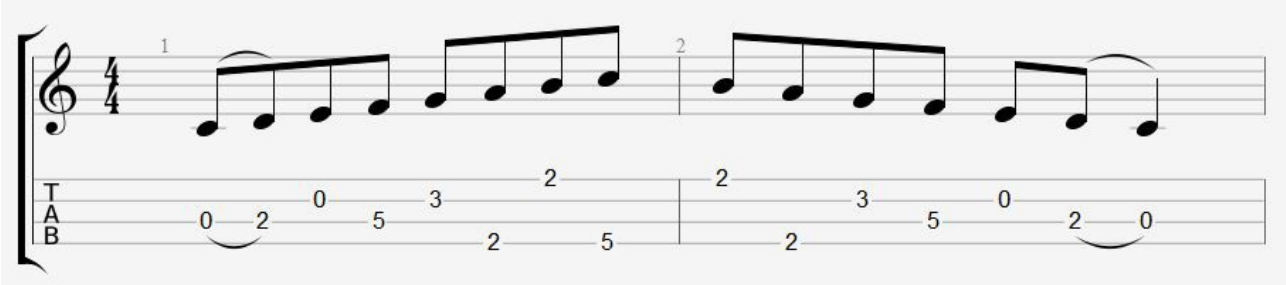
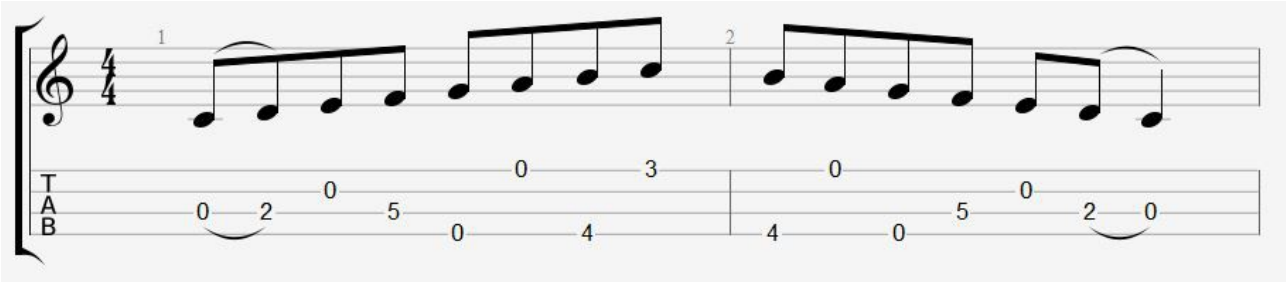
https://youtu.be/qS3x3Ukb_v4

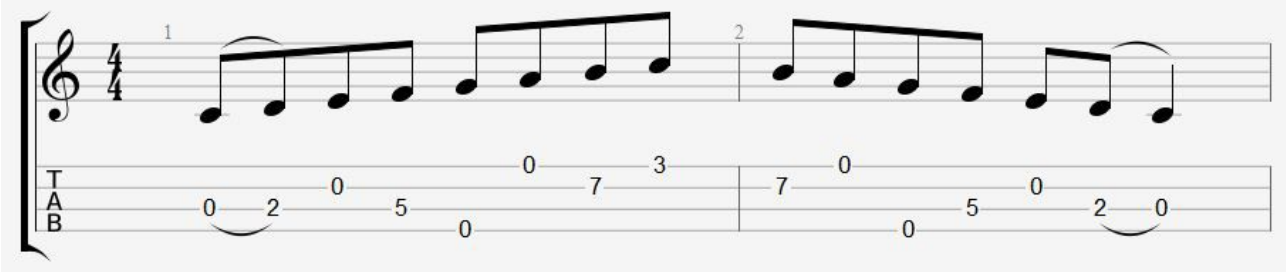
1. You will need to make a barre (cover all the strings across the second fret) for this one.



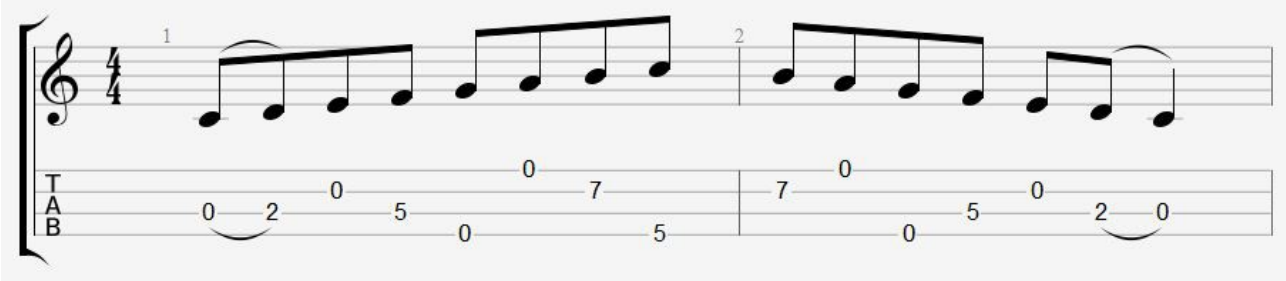
2. A bit better, here we have a couple more open strings



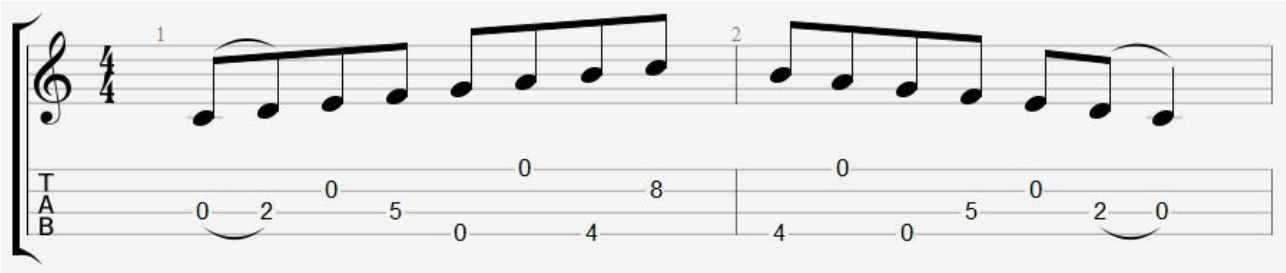
3. B is moved to the second string, seventh fret



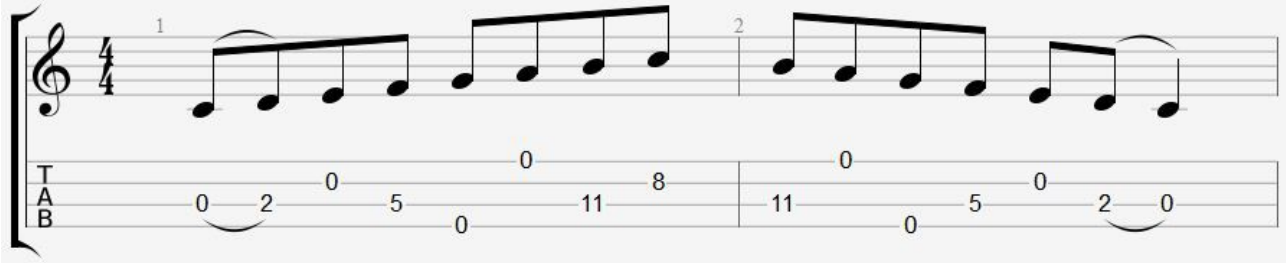
4. That's more like it – the most ear-pleasing way to play the scale!



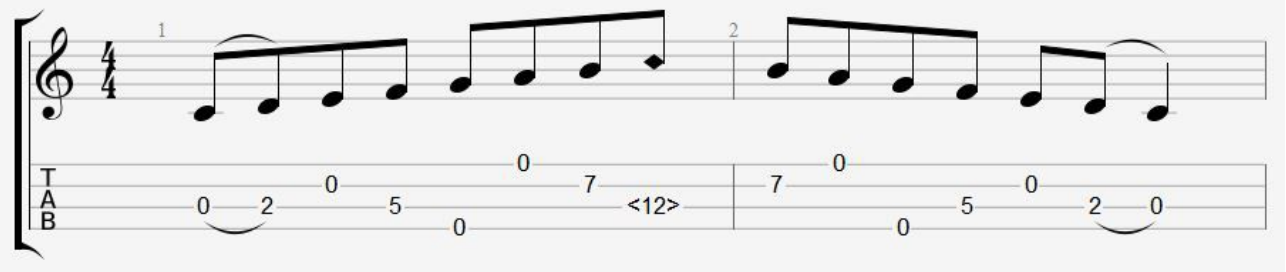
5. Here we swap the positions of B and (high) C, this can be useful when the same two notes repeat – you can avoid playing them in the same place by alternating with the previous positions.



6. B and C move up to the 11th and 8th frets respectively. Good to have this option sometimes.



7. The high C is on the third string. I like to play harmonics instead of fretting the note because the uke's neck is short so fretted notes this high up have very little sustain. Play the harmonic by touching (not pressing down) the string directly above the 12th fret and pluck the string as you would normally with your right hand.



More Scales

Paste this link into your browser if the video won't open:
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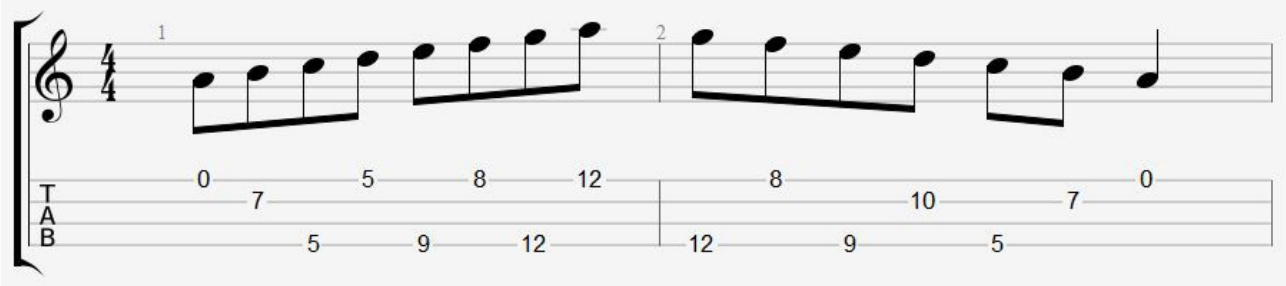
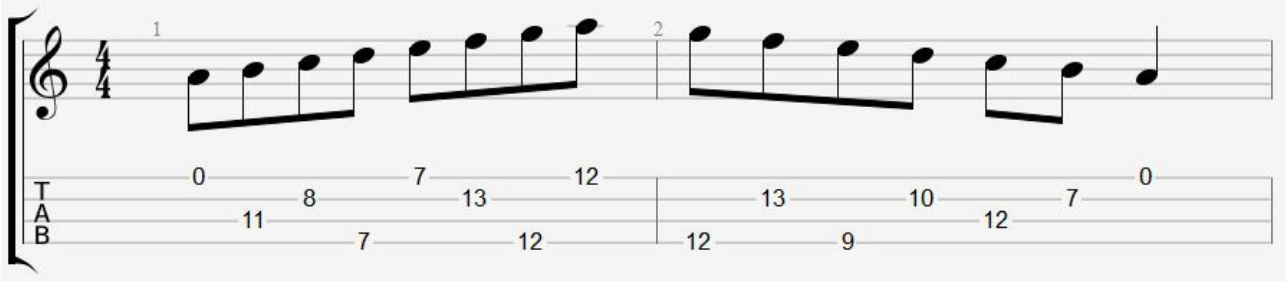
A minor

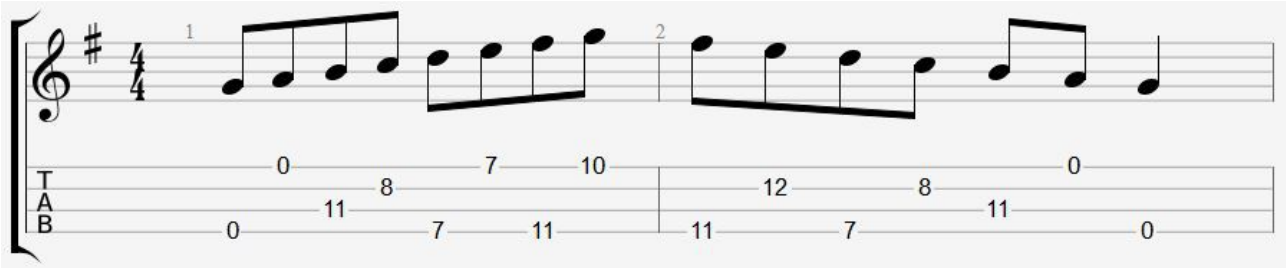
A minor is the Aeolian mode of C major – it has all the same notes, just played in a different order. When you start with the sixth note of any major scale, it becomes minor. That's because a minor scale is identified by the third note – it's three semi-tones (frets) higher than the root. So A major would be A B C#, and A minor is A B C, just as in the C major scale.
For the G and A on the 12th fret, it's easier (and nicer) to play harmonics. Otherwise, you'll have to make a barre with your little finger (pinky). Tricky, but doable with practice. Notice too, that when descending, it's easier to play the D on the fourth string, 10th fret rather than the first string; 5th fret.



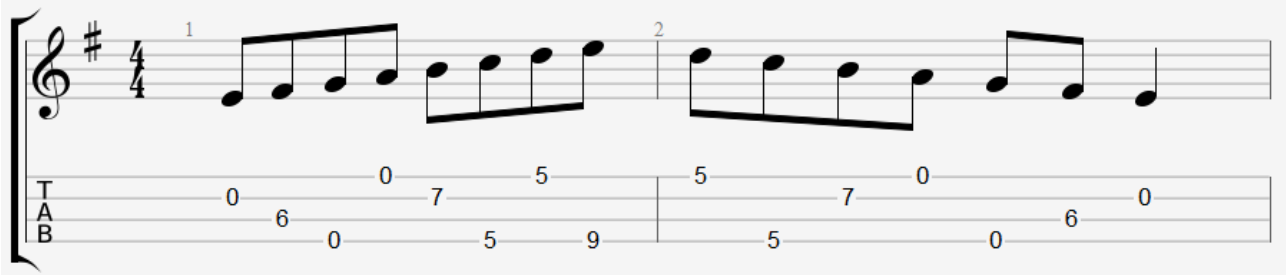
Or you could play it like this (a bit awkward but at least you're really getting to know the fretboard!) - you'll need to make a barre on the 7th fret:



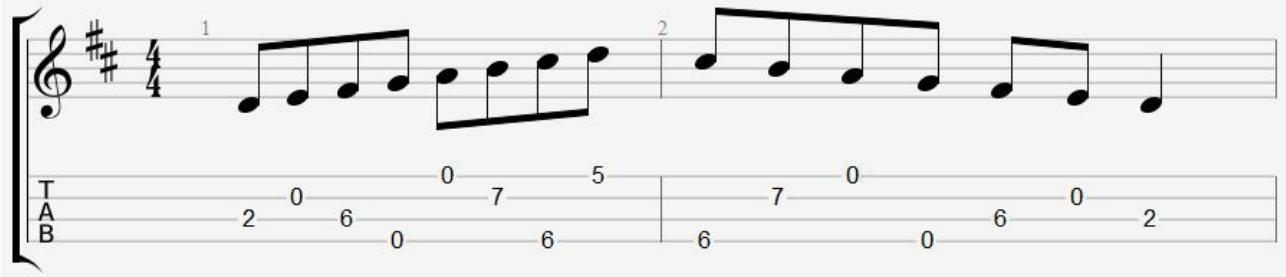
G major: high up the neck! It's a bit unnatural to jump from open strings up to the eleventh fret, but can be very useful in campanella picking.



E minor : The relative minor of G major, starting with the open E string. Barre on the 5th fret:

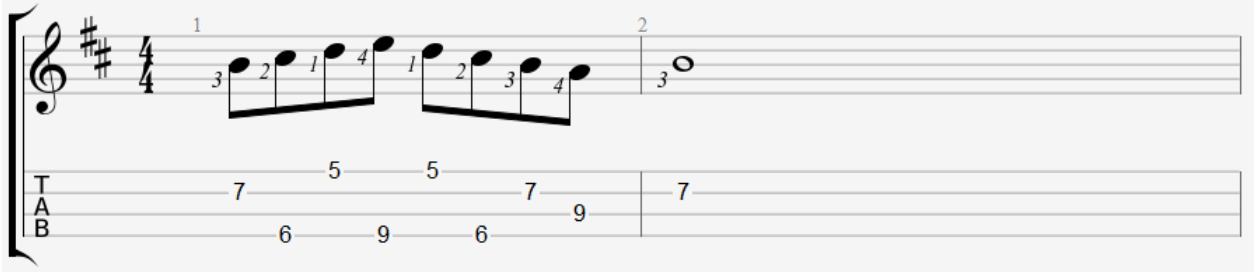


D major



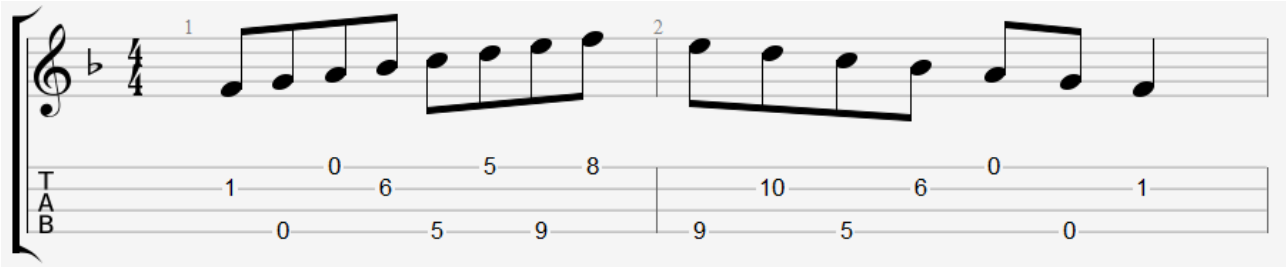
B minor: relative minor of D major

This is not a complete scale but a pretty run in Bm which is reminiscent of a Celtic harp. I've indicated the left hand fingering – notice that it's just like holding down a chord with your little finger having to move a couple of times:

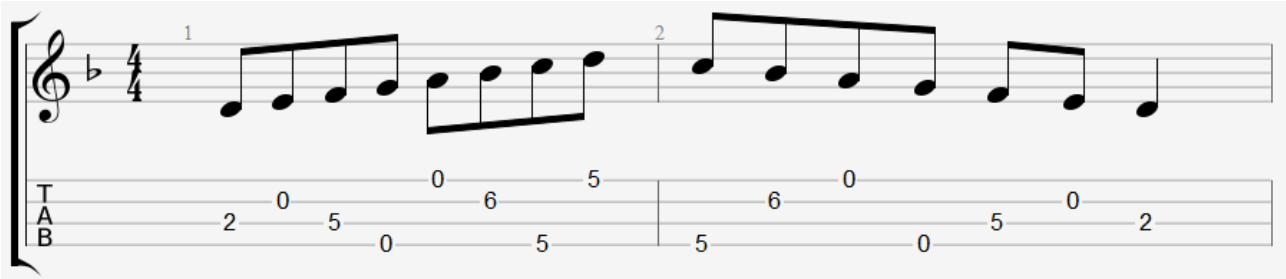


F major

You could change the root from second string, 1st fret to third string, 5th fret. That would make it a little easier and maybe smoother but I still prefer the sound of the F on the 1st fret.

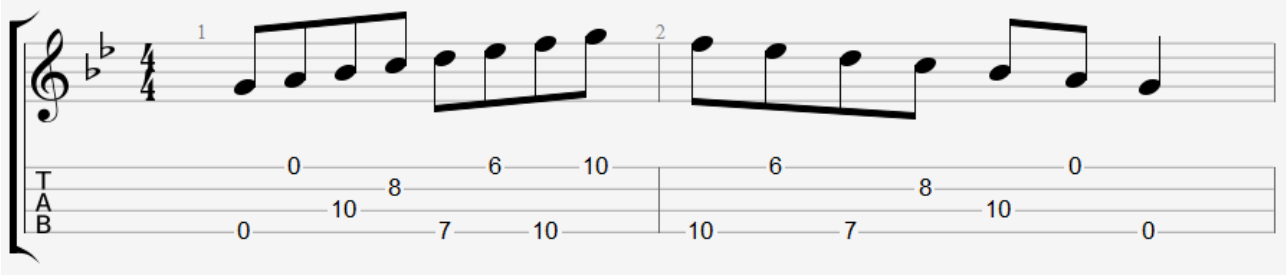


D minor : relative minor of F major



G minor

this is the relative minor of B♭. I've not tabbed out the scale of B♭ because you have the notes here! Sorry for my laziness, you could try working it out yourself. Here's a thing though: a lot of guitarists generally hate these keys with flats because there fingerings are usually very tiring on the left hand (loads of barre chords). But I like arranging in F and B♭ on the ukulele – it can give a very sweet campanella sound...



Some Tunes to Learn!

London Bridge is Falling down

Let's start with an easy tune which I hope you already know (not sure if it's as well-known in the States). I've put the right-hand fingering that I use but like I've said, it's up to you to find a way playing that suits you best.

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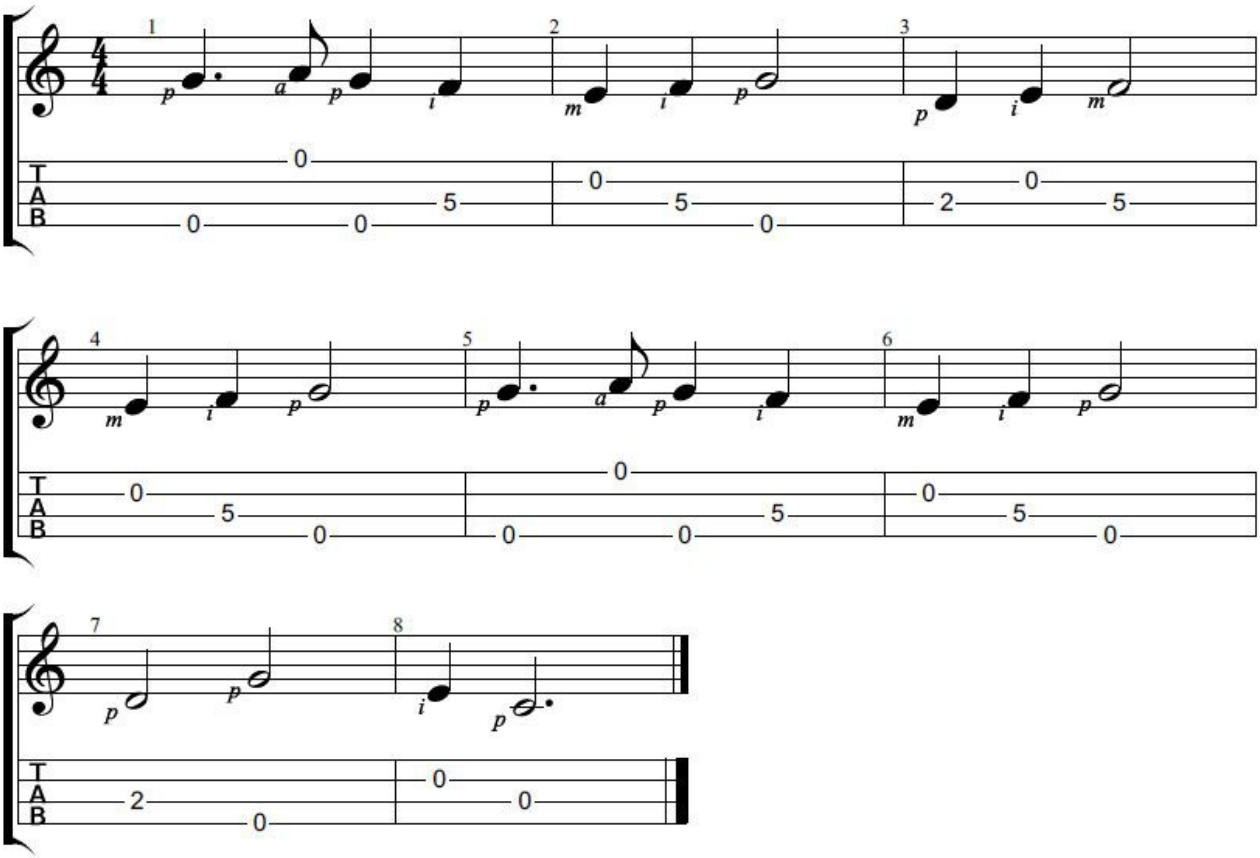

Lovely Joan

This English song is in the Dorian mode. For each scale, there are seven modes, one for each note. The Dorian mode is the mode that starts (and finishes) on the second note of the scale and is very common in Celtic music. To get a feel for it, try strumming the chords D minor (the second chord in the family of C major) then change to C major. Lots of Irish tunes have this kind of chord change with a few embellishments here and there.
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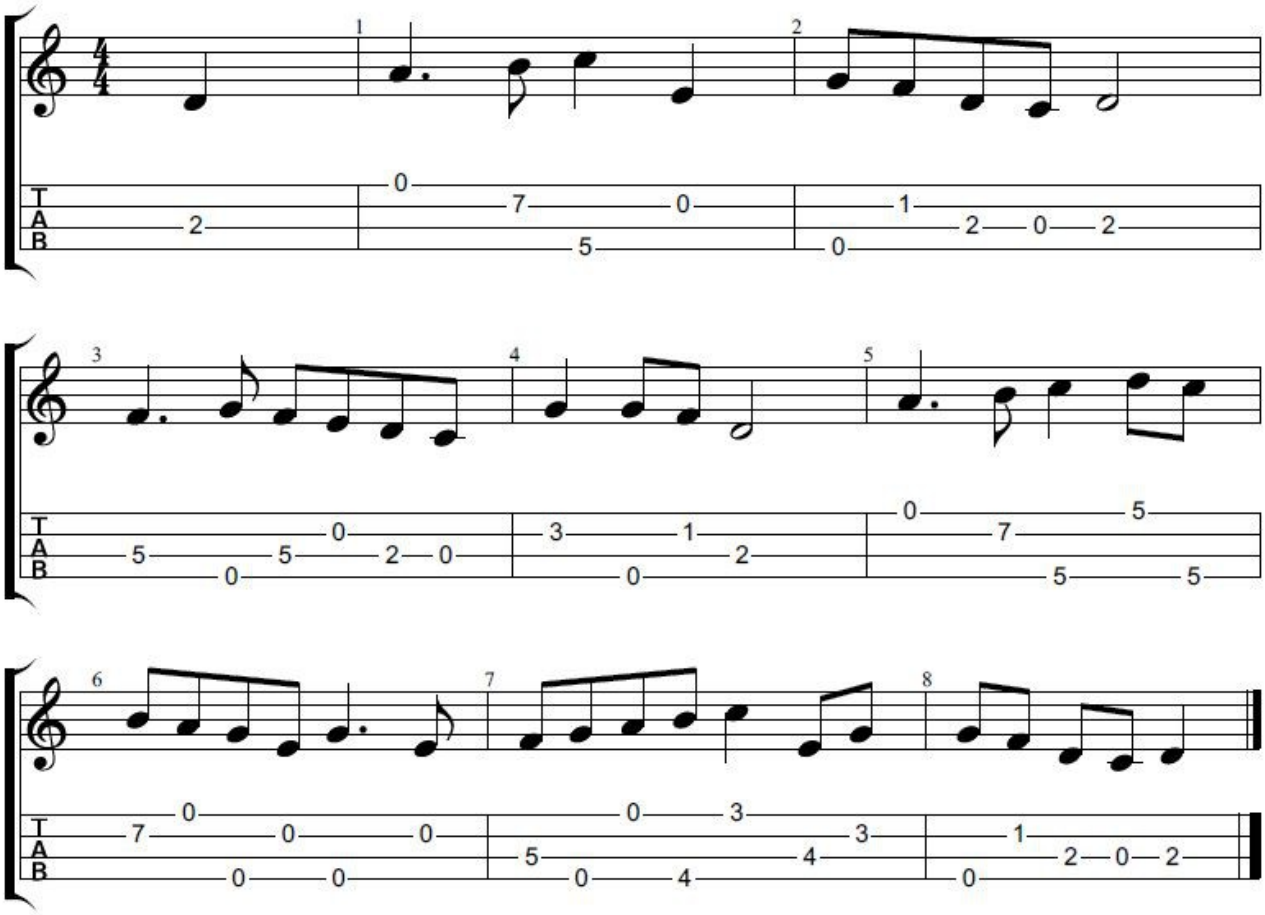

The Plains of Waterloo

You can see that I've arranged it the key of C (there are no sharp or flat signs in the key signature). But there are plenty of F sharps and the tune starts with a G, so is it Mixolydian mode? Not really because there are F naturals too. Then it ends with a D, so is it Dorian mode? The guitarist Martin Simpson says that this tune shows how sophisticated traditional music can be – musicologists would never believe that a peasant could write a tune like this. I don't agree. I think that ordinary people can write beautiful music exactly because they know nothing about music theory and are thus unrestrained by rules and conventions. It's a really pretty tune, you'll see!

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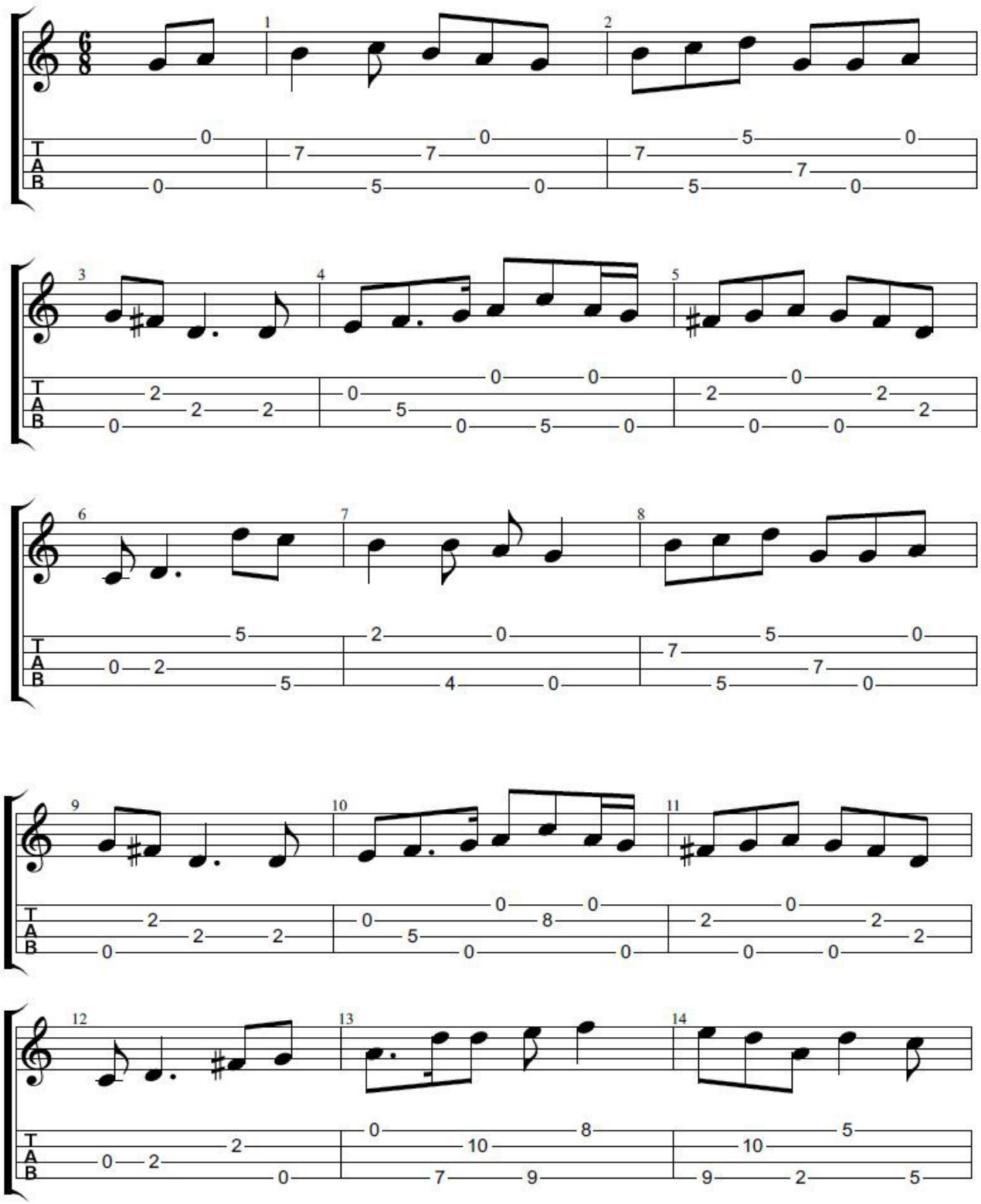
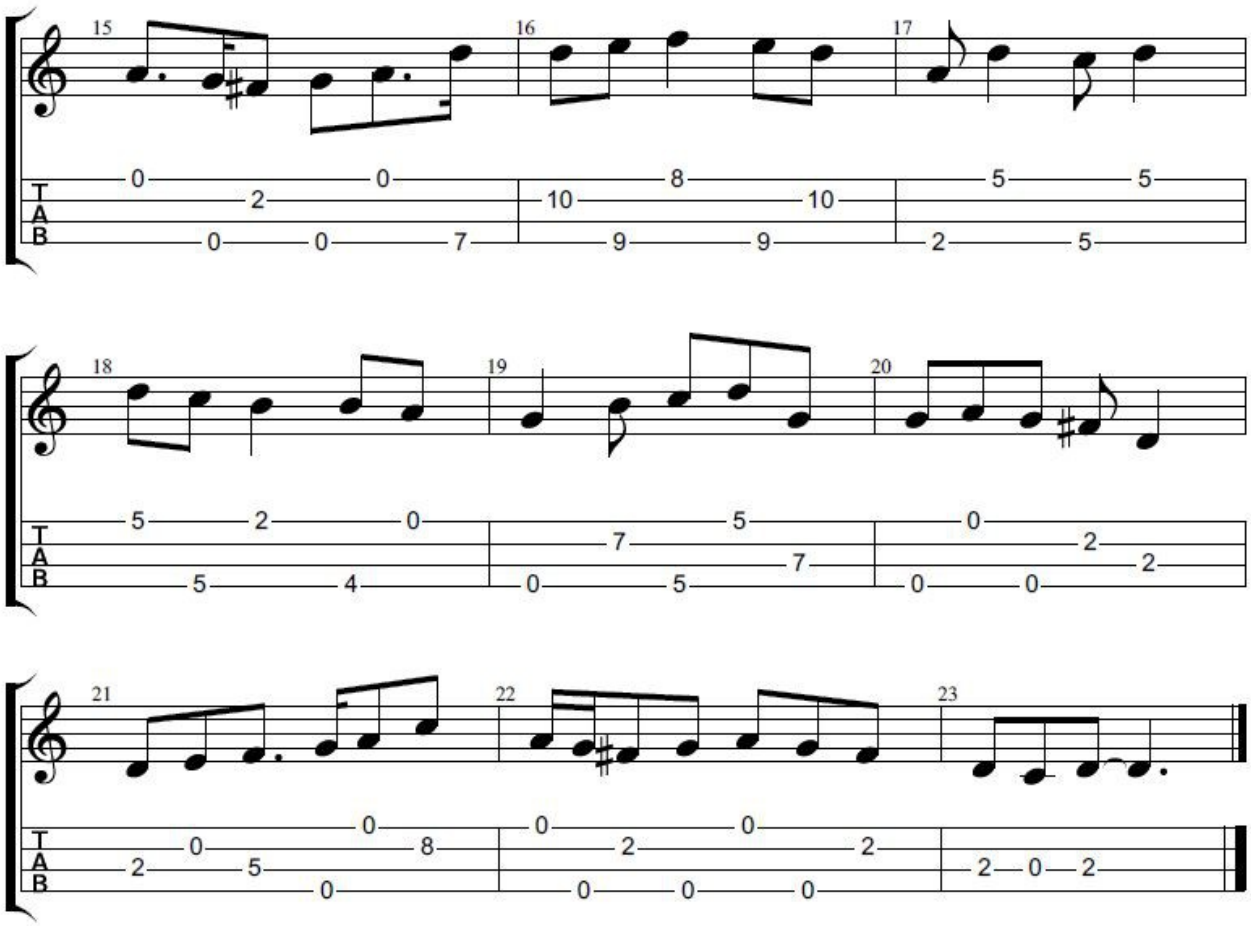
The Plains of Waterloo



The Plains of Waterloo (cont.)



Ode To Joy

Try this easy classical piece, Beethoven's Ode To Joy. To increase sustain and maintain the campanella voicing, we're going to play Fs on the second string, first fret and the third string, fifth fret, and As on the first string, open and the second string. This is a good piece to build up your speed – once you've got the hang of it, practice playing it faster and faster.

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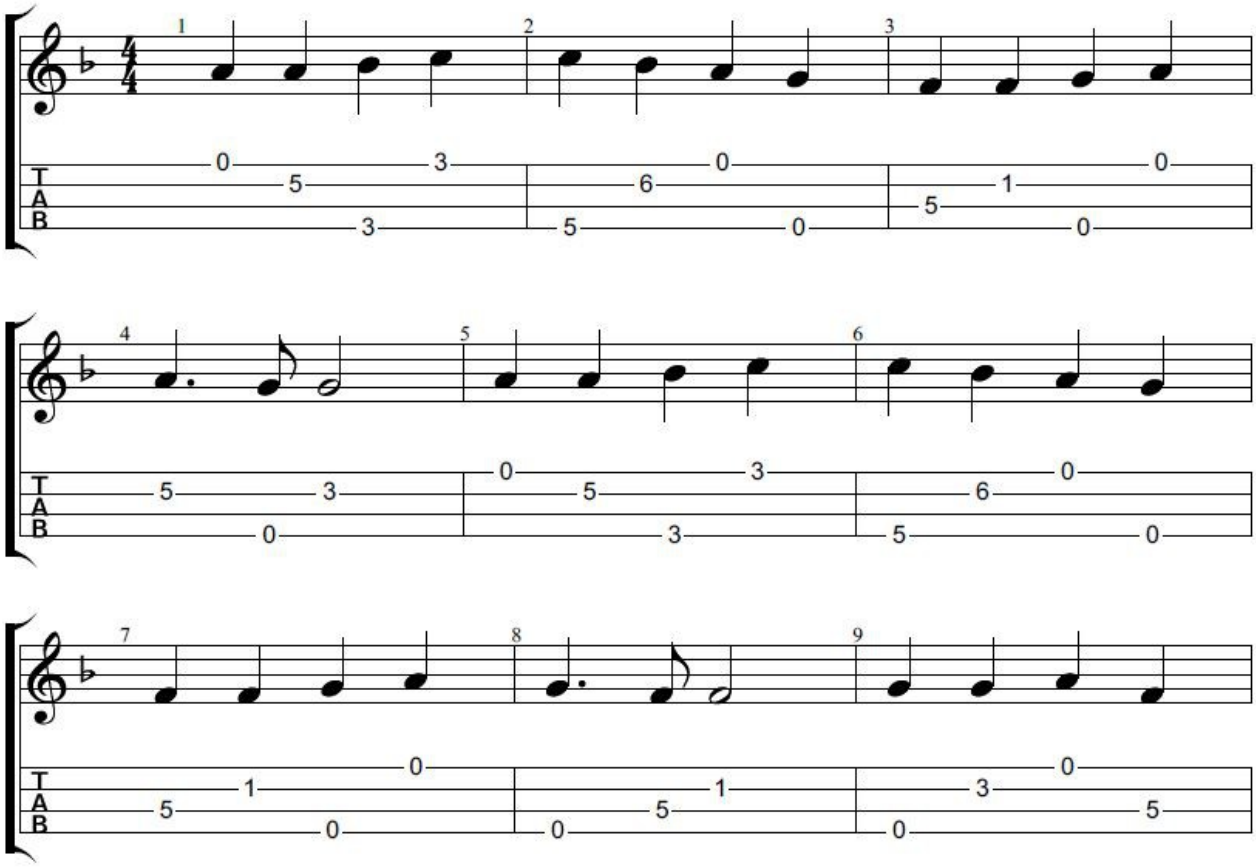
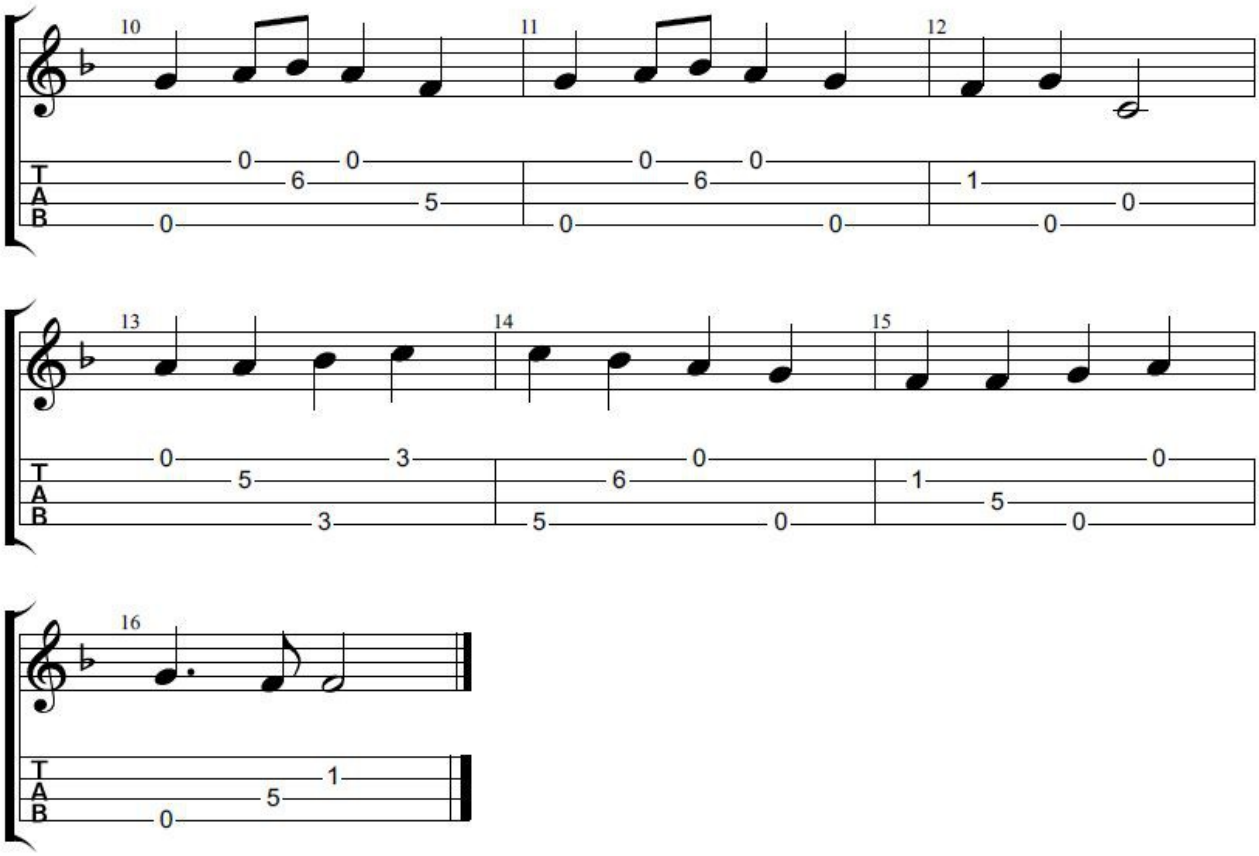


Ode to Joy (Cont.)



Jon's Jig

Now for something with a Celtic flavour. I wrote this tune more as an exercise more than anything else. It gives you an idea of some of the shapes and patterns that I regularly use. The trickiest part of this tune is in the second part when you have to play a high C and G on the twelfth fret – I make a barre with my little finger which is a bit awkward. You could replace these notes with open harmonics to make it a little easier.

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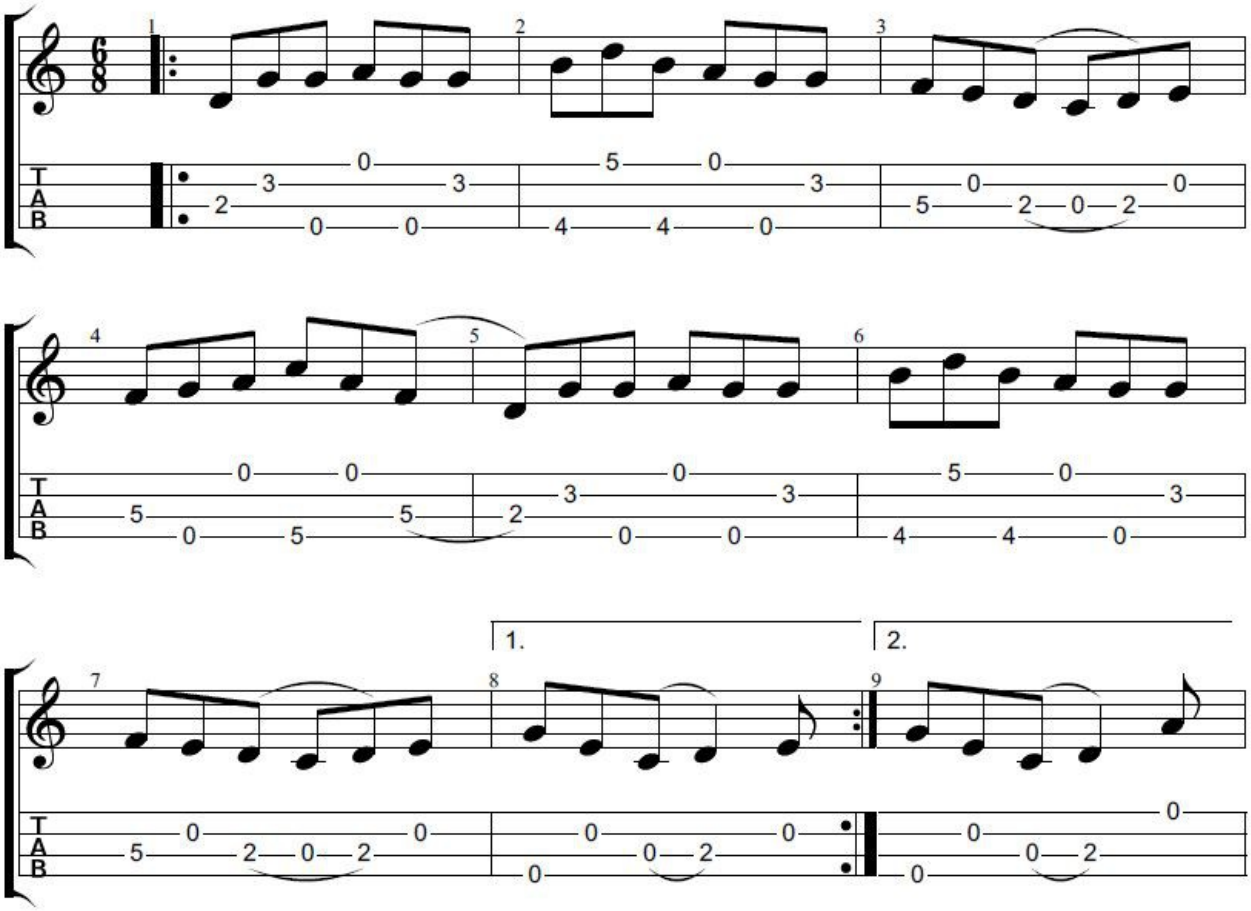
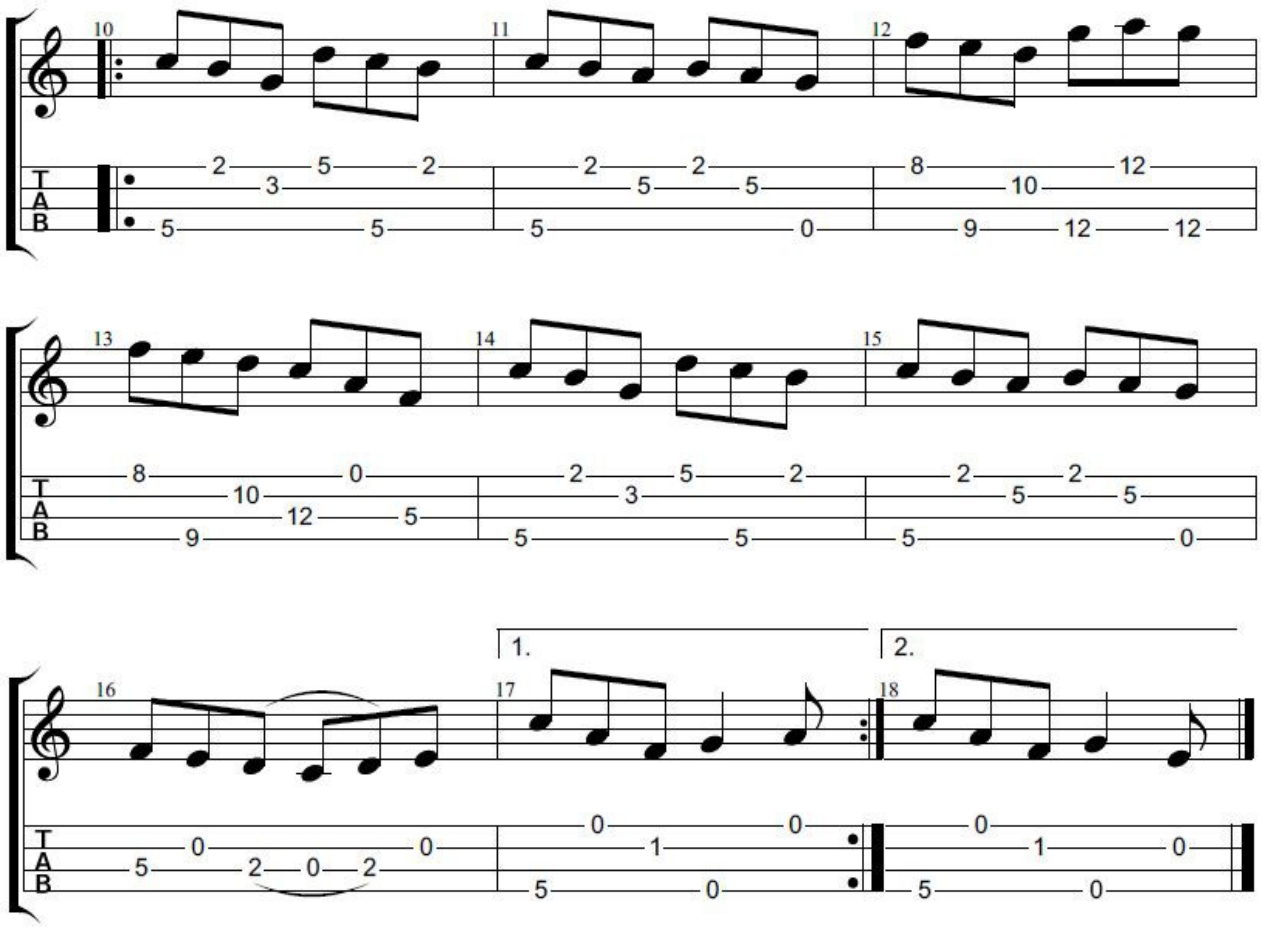
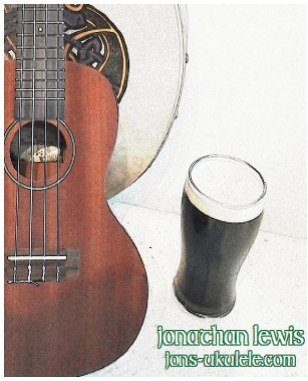


Jon's Jig (cont.)





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More Resources

John King Nalu Music
The late John King is the one person who can be credited for reviving the campanella style of playing ukulele. He has a fantastic book of classical music (for advanced players). Read his article on the history of the ukulele, it's fascinating.

Tim Keough (ukuleletim on YouTube)
I would never have learned about campanella if I hadn't come across Tim's channel, and for that I'm eternally grateful. This one video converted me from someone who thought ukes were for three-chord strummers to someone who is convinced that the uke can make music just as beautiful as any other instrument.

Ukulele Hunt
Al Wood's site is the best place to go for tabs and chords and to discover new ukulele music. Subscribe to the ukulelehunt newsletter for the latest updates