



"WHAT UKE SHOULD I BUY AS A NEWBIE?"

This is probably the most common question asked but it is also a very important question when a newcomer is faced with the numerous sizes, styles, brands and manufacturers available these days so based upon the experience of myself and others I will attempt to answer the question.

Starting with the smallest common uke the sizes go up soprano, concert, tenor, and finally the largest is the baritone. The size of your hands or the style that you wish to play may determine which size you go for but most members in our club go for the Concert size as this provides a slightly larger fret board and makes reaching those difficult chords just a little easier.

Much will also depend on how much money you have to spend and unlike almost every other instrument or hobby you can get away with spending very little and get a good playable instrument. It is generally recognised that the Mahalo U30 colored soprano uke (look inside the sound hole for that

number) is an excellent first entry market Uke at around £20-£25 and many seasoned players have one around in case they need something on the beach or for the picnic. Slightly more expensive (but worth the extra if you can afford it) are the middle of the road range of Ukes which will serve you very well in the £100 to £175 bracket. These include Lag, Vintage, Lazy Ukulele, LaKa, Tanglewood and a relatively new comer to the scene but gaining in popularity is the Barnes & Mullins which is very well made range of instruments and again represent excellent value for money.

Most agree that all these Ukes are vastly improved by re-stringing them with Aquilla strings. Unfortunately most manufacturers and retailers have not yet learned that stringing instruments with decent strings might mean they will sell more of them and that applies to almost all the bottom end and intermediate ukes.

Leaving the cheaper end behind and moving towards the intermediate to higher end ukes there are a number of newer brands on the market and it is hard to keep up with them all. If you live in the UK then you may be restricted simply by what is available in this country. Sometimes a really good value uke is on the market then when the shipment runs out there are no more available. It is also surprising that there is such a big cost-wise leap upwards to the £250 plus area.

The plastic backed but wooden faced ukes such as the Applause brand and the Flukes and Fleas have a lot of friends and they are certainly good workhorse ukes that

should last for years and are not as delicate as the totally solid wooden ones.

A few years ago the intermediate market was dominated by laminate/plywood ukes but now there are a number of solid wooden ukes appearing and opinions vary as to the quality. It also seems that even within a particular model you can get good and bad ones. That is not surprising given that wood is not grown to any specification!

And this is the difference between intermediate and top quality ukes where the timbers have been selected for the latter. If possible then take a uke player with you or ask his/her advice before splashing out. Current solid wood models that have many friends are branded Kala, Ohana, Lanikai, Anue Nue, Most of these are made in China or Korea but the standards are improving year by year.

The next problem is where to see or buy these ukes. Unfortunately Ebay has it heroes and villains and seemingly more of the latter than we would like. Flowery over-the-top descriptions of mediocre and even bad instruments are rife and one retailer offers the selling point that before shipping he will tune the uke - big deal, because almost certainly by the time you get it then it will be out of tune and most experienced players will tune their instrument a number of times a session anyway. Unfortunately many people are taken in by the 'friendly chat' and prices rocket as bidders have no real idea of what the correct retail price should be. It is not unusual for ukes to change hands for TWICE the price that you could buy them at a high street shop. Very often 'Buy it now' prices are higher than the

local shop prices. The other problem with such auction sites like this is it's a lottery. Yes you can find a good Uke and get a good deal (free gig bag probably worth £2 ?) and pay what you feel is a good price...but.... Would you buy a car without driving it first?

Retailers (some even sell on Ebay) are tried and trusted by the UK ukulele community and are the best bet for the newbie.

One such retailer who comes highly recommended and is called Right Track Music which is situated at 25-27 Tufton Street, Ashford, Kent, TN23 1QN.

www.righttrackmusic.co.uk

Here Sue and Chris have an excellent range of Ukes on display and all at good sensible prices. They are always happy to spend time talking with you and will provide good practical advice on what instrument is going to be best for you based on your current ability and requirements.

Remember to pick it up and try before you buy it. It must feel right as well as sound right and at Right Track Music they always encourage you to try their whole range before you make your final choice. Other well known retailers like Southern Ukulele Stores, Bonsai Guitars, Eagle Music, are all retailers that have earned trust in the UK Uke community but remember with the cost of travel these days it may end up costing you a lot more money to travel there to try it and buy it which is in my opinion always money better spent locally on that better quality Ukulele.

Another source of course is the US and many of us frequently buy from American retailers and dealers BUT remember that you will need to do some mathematics. Check out the dollar/pound exchange rate and then remember that you will pay export duty, VAT and the delivery service who charge a fee (usually around £20) for collecting the duty etc. If you are buying a high quality uke then it can still work out cheaper.

I know this article was aimed at the newcomer but if you can afford it then a top quality uke, even if not 'adopted', can fetch a good price on the UK market - you may even make a small profit.

Buying secondhand is a leap into the dark unless you know what you are doing. Watching Ebay has taught me that it is a minefield. I have seen ukes that are almost universally shunned go for silly high prices and I have seen excellent ukes go for a song (but not very often). Either take good advice or stay off that market would be my advice.

Private sales by people who themselves are experienced uke players are usually another good source of instruments but beware of the 'It was found in the attic and it looks nice but I don't really know anything about ukes' - they usually know more than they are letting on!

If I have not helped you with this article and you want a uke then do not hesitate to go to one of our club members and ask them what their best buys are. Okay you will get varying opinions but you will also learn a lot about ukes, prices and what and where they are available.

John

June 2011