



Do You Have Ukes In Your Toolbox?

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A few years back one of the fifth-grade teachers at my school suggested Israel Kamakawiwo'ole's version of **Somebody Over The Rainbow** for one of our culmination songs. The wrinkle was that she wanted the kids to accompany themselves on ukuleles. I said what I usually say when one of my classroom colleagues is interested enough in our music program to make a suggestion – "I love it!" – despite the fact that the school didn't own any ukuleles, and I did not play (I did have guitar skills).

We came up with money for ten ukes (turns out they're pretty inexpensive), and a few weeks later the kids brought down the house with their ukulele-accompanied version of **Somebody Over The Rainbow** partnered with Bob Dylan's **Forever Young**. Since then, those ten ukuleles, and twenty more I have added over time, have become central to how I teach general music, particularly in fourth and fifth grade. In addition to being affordable, these instruments are versatile, portable, easy to achieve success with, and unsurpassed for teaching triadic harmony and introducing the concept of chord changes.

As everybody knows, the ukulele (pronounced oo-koo-lay-lay) is a traditional Hawaiian instrument, albeit one with a fairly recent tradition. In 1879, Portuguese immigrants brought the *braguinha*, a small four-stringed chordophone similar to the *charango* or *cuatro*, to the islands. A woodworker named Manuel Nunes is credited with giving the ukulele its modern design – enlarging the resonator, simplifying the tuning, and replacing the steel strings with gut so that it could be played without a plectrum.¹

The ukulele is central to music education in Hawaii, but it has also been very popular in Canada since the 1960s, where J. Chalmers Doane, a music educator from Halifax, Nova Scotia, has been promoting the ukulele as a central component of general music instruction.² Doane's efforts, and more recently those of former Doane student James Hill, have been so successful that when attending a ukulele jam anywhere in the United States, one will invariably encounter a large number of Canadian ex-pats, who learned to play in elementary school.

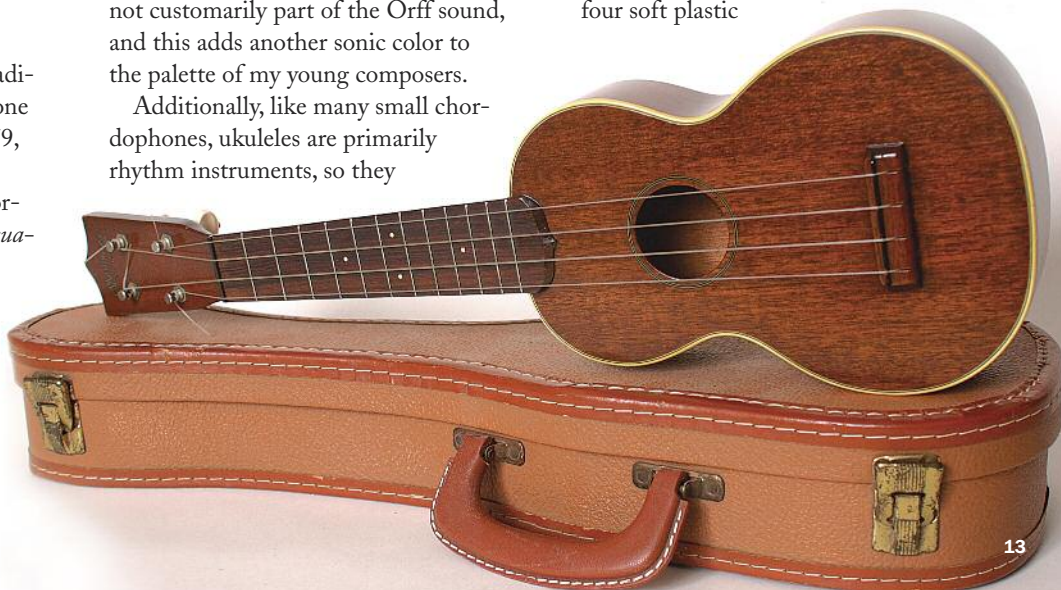
There are a several programs – **Guitars in the Classroom** comes to mind – that will come to your school and supply everything including instruments and instruction, but what about adding the ukulele on your own? Is it worth the time and trouble for a teacher in an existing Orff or Kodály-based music program to develop ukulele skills? I believe the answer is yes. In my Orff program ukuleles fit well, partly because the easiest chord to play on the ukulele – C – is the also the key in which much of the music for the Orff barred instruments is written. At the same time, ukes have a timbre that is not customarily part of the Orff sound, and this adds another sonic color to the palette of my young composers.

Additionally, like many small chordophones, ukuleles are primarily rhythm instruments, so they

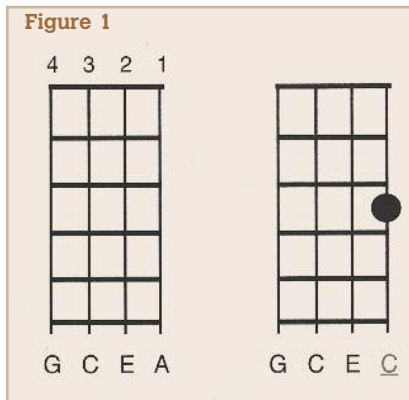
present all sorts of ways to introduce or reinforce concepts of meter, durational value, and swing in particular.

In choral music, opportunities for students to accompany themselves on ukulele or other instruments are less frequent. Here, the value of the ukulele is as an accompanying tool for the instructor. My elementary school cannot afford a full-time accompanist, so when I am teaching chorus, the ukulele is a welcome alternative to running back and forth to the piano. Accompanying my students on ukulele allows me to make eye contact while listening to them sing, indeed, to stand right in front of them (and I haven't whacked anyone with the headstock yet, which, I am sorry to say, is a hazard with a guitar). I have begun to use a uke to accompany warm ups, as well. Tuned as it is on Sol, Do, Mi, and La (aka "My Dog Has Fleas") the use of ukulele creates teachable moments about those intervallic relationships and a better recognition of when instruments and voices are not in tune.

Guitar skills are helpful, but hardly indispensable, when picking up a uke for the first time. Actually, ukulele is much easier to play than guitar – four soft plastic



strings instead of six, no pick to lose inside the instrument. The standard tuning for a soprano uke is a C6 chord (see Figure 1). To produce C major hold the 1st string – “A” – down in the third fret box as shown, making it an octave C. (It follows that putting a finger in the second box produces a Cmaj7, and putting it in the first box makes a C7). By Adding the F chord (the IV chord in C) and a G chord, (the V), you are now ready to play any I-IV-V song from *La Bamba* to



Wimoweh in C.

C is not an ideal key for young singers, but having learned the I-IV-V chords in C, you already know two of the chords – F and C – needed to play I-IV-V in F. Simply add the IV chord

in F or Bb – using the fingering shown (see Figure 2). And if you add a D chord to your repertoire, you can play the I-IV-V progression in G (G-C-D), a very useful key for pairing with soprano recorders.

Mastering these five chords and accompanying strumming patterns, something easily achievable over a long weekend, will give you a more than adequate skill set to accompany your kids or to teach them to accompany themselves. The very simplicity and accessibility of the ukulele has often led to a lack of credibility for the instrument as a serious tool for music-making.³ Even if the goal of your music program is polished choral or orchestral performances, however, don't be too quick to dismiss the uke. A growing number of music education theorists have begun to classify musical performance as being either *presentational* – those that align with the more formal, conservatory model – or *participatory* – more informal exercises in community music-making where musicians of varying levels of ability play together to please themselves.⁴ Ukuleles, with their amateur sensibility and adaptability to any venue or circumstances, fit in the participatory model very well.

At a time when community support

is increasingly important to sustain music education in elementary schools, giving parents and other community members a means to experience the joys of playing music along side the kids can be a smart idea, as well as a fun alternative to the winter and spring concerts. And while there is little doubt that formal music training produces a deep understanding of how to play individual instruments, including voice, participatory music encourages musical behavior, and in doing so, creates more transferable musical skills. For elementary school music teachers, what could be more essential than that?

1. Greenberg, M. (1992). “The Ukulele In Your Classroom.” *Music Educators Journal*. 79(3). p. 43.

2. *ibid.* p. 44.

3. Thibeault, M. & Evoy, J. (2011). “Building Your Own Musical Community: How YouTube, Miley Cyrus and the Ukulele Can Create a New Kind of Ensemble.” *General Music Today*. 24(3). p. 48.

4. Turino, T. (2008). *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

