

“Picking” the Right Ukulele

National Standards: 1, 7, 10-11

Over the past decade, the ukulele has become more popular as an instrument for beginners and can be heard in a variety of recorded music genres. At one time confined to a handful of styles, such as folk and the music of Hawaii, now, the ukulele can be heard in rock, pop and others. Purchasing a first ukulele will benefit from a basic understanding of the instrument’s construction, there are some other things to look for, which are included in this lesson.

Prepare

Have students discuss the different kinds of ukuleles and why one might want to play one or the other. Playing songs like Israel Kamakawiwo’ole’s version of “Somewhere Over The Rainbow,” Train’s “Hey, Soul Sister” and Jake Shimabukuro’s “Bohemian Rhapsody,” can illustrate the instruments uses in popular music. For a more modern example, try Taylor Swift’s "Fearless."

Key points in the article:

- When it comes to price, don't skimp on quality. While some ukuleles may look great, examining components and construction quality is important and investing in a better instrument will likely save future problems.
- The ukulele should be tuned each time it is played; hence, good quality tuning machines are an important component.
- When it comes to comfort, finding a ukulele with a neck-feel you prefer is important. If it is too thin, your fingers will feel cramped and playing chords cleanly may be more difficult.

Discuss

Is the ukulele a rhythm instrument or can it be used to solo? What sonic quality does the ukulele bring to the songs? How does the instrument stand out from the other instruments utilized?

Begin

Review vocabulary words from the article:

- LAMINATED – To overlay a flat surface with a layer of plastic or some other protective material.

- NUT – a slotted plastic ridge upon which strings rest, placed at the top of a guitar or ukulele’s neck to ensure that the strings are properly spaced and sit at the right height above the fingerboard.
- SOPRANO - the highest of the four standard singing voices.
- HUMIDITY - a quantity representing the amount of water vapor in the atmosphere or in a gas.
- HEADSTOCK - the widened piece at the end of the neck of a guitar, to which the tuning pegs are fixed.

Questions

1. Name one or more of the common styles and sizes of ukuleles mentioned in the lesson.
2. Name the three main styles of ukulele construction mentioned in the lesson.
3. How often should you tune a ukulele?
4. What should you look for in a tuner?
5. Name the things to consider when purchasing a ukulele, mentioned in the lesson.

Answers

1. Soprano, concert, tenor and baritone.
2. Laminated, solid top with laminated back and sides or all solid.
3. A ukulele should be tuned each time it is played.
4. The tuners should be open back (gears visible).
5. Size, construction, tuners, neck, electric, price vs. quality.

Expand:

Have some different ukuleles in the classroom and have students experiment with playing them. Which feel better to certain students? Look to see if one student's "trash" is another student's "treasure." For example, is one student's favorite ukulele another student's least favorite? Why?