

## Buying and Setting Up An Entry Level Uke

A friend recently asked me to buy an entry level uke for her. I had to go through a number of instruments before I found one that would be playable. Here are a few things to watch out for and adjust.....

From: Richard G's Ukulele Songbook [www.scorpex.net/uke.htm](http://www.scorpex.net/uke.htm)

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### **Internal Condition:**

Feel around under the uke top, through the sound hole. Entry level ukes are always made from plywood. On several ukes, I found that a layer was missing in sections underneath the top ply. Loose ply layers can set up awkward vibrations and buzzing. Also make sure that internal braces are firmly glued in place. Loose braces buzz!

### **Frets:**

Make sure that the fret ends are smooth. Sharp, rough fret ends make playing very uncomfortable. The tops of the frets should be smooth – rough frets will wear the strings at the fret, leading to breakage. The frets should not protrude too far from the fret board – high frets lead to over-stretching of the strings when they are played, causing the note to go sharp.

### **Bridge Position:**

Bridge position is very important for making sure that the uke plays in tune when the strings are played in anything but the open position. This can be checked by measuring the distance from the nut end of the fret board to fret 12, and comparing it with the distance from fret 12 to the saddle. The distance from fret 12 to the saddle should be a few millimetres longer than the distance between the nut end of the fret board and fret 12.

### **Neck:**

Check that the neck is straight by sighting along it. Better still, place a ruler on the frets. The ruler should come into contact with all frets. The necks on several ukes I looked at were bent downwards from fret 3 towards the nut. These instruments are nearly impossible to set up without string buzzing on the frets. The neck should be angled slightly upwards from the body, or at worst parallel with it.

### **Angle of the Head:**

Make sure that the head is angled down from the neck sufficiently to obtain good string pressure at the nut. Low string pressure is more likely to give buzzing.

### **Tuners:**

Most ukes at this level have geared tuners. Make sure that the posts are a reasonably tight fit in the uke head and that the winders are tight in the two metal brackets that hold them. The Phillips head screw in the tuners can be tightened if necessary. Loose tuners are a curse and must be avoided.

**Saddle:**

Only buy ukes with a saddle that can be removed, as it is often necessary to take out the saddle and adjust its height by sanding its bottom. Make sure that the saddle protrudes for a minimum of 3 mm above the bridge. If not, it may be difficult to ensure that the saddle is still proud of the bridge after it is adjusted. Make sure that the saddle is a tight fit in the slot in the bridge – this is necessary to ensure that string vibrations are effectively transferred to the uke body.

**Bridge:**

Avoid large, bulky bridges. Make sure that the break angle over the saddle (the angle made by the strings from the anchoring point to the saddle compared with the line of the strings from the saddle to the nut) is large enough to give good string pressure. Again, low string pressure can promote buzzing.

**Action (string height above the fret board):**

Measure the height of the strings at fret 12. I like to see about 2 mm here. If the strings are significantly higher, take the saddle out and sand the bottom until the desired string height is reached. Then adjust the action at the nut.

The string slots on the nuts of entry level ukes are almost always cut too shallow, giving high strings and intonation problems as the strings are over-stretched when played at a fret. This can be easily adjusted by cutting the slots deeper. I use a hacksaw blade – straight cut for G and A, wobble it sideways as you cut for C and E. The strings can be taken out of the slots and stretched over the top of the nut as this is being done – slip them back in as you go and check for buzzing. Take the strings down close to fret 1. If you go too far (indicated by buzzing when the string is played), place a small piece of paper in the nut slot under the string. If the buzzing is still there, use a thicker piece of paper.

**Strings:**

The strings on entry level ukes are always dreadful glorified fishing line. Rip them off and replace them with Aquila Nylguts. The difference is extraordinary.

**Intonation (the ability of the uke to play the right note when a string is played at a fret):**

Factors such as bridge position, height of the frets, fret position, strings and height of the action all affect intonation. Many of these need adjustment prior to getting good intonation performance from an entry level uke. I took my clip on tuner with me and did a check of ukes in the store, playing each string in a scale up the neck to fret 12, which takes you back to the open string tuning. It tells you straight off how far the notes wander from true frequency (almost inevitably sharp) as you work up the neck. The uke I selected checked out pretty well, indicating that major adjustments were not necessary. Be careful if strings have not been tensioned to tuned pitch for long on the uke you are checking – the strings sometimes stretch and go flat just quickly enough to compensate for going sharp as you play up the neck, fooling you into thinking the intonation is perfect!