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Getting In Tune

In This Chapter

- Understanding notes
- Learning the “standard tuning” of the ukulele
- Using a tuner, piano, or yourself to tune
- Developing ear training

Before you start playing your ukulele, you need to get it in tune, meaning each of your instrument’s four strings is matched with specific notes. If your ukulele is not tuned, you’ll think it sounds funny or strange, or just flat out awful! Even people who have never played any musical instrument before can tell when one is out of tune.

It is even more important to be in tune when you are playing with other musicians, no matter what instruments they are playing. Very few things put an audience’s ears on edge than hearing the sound of instruments that aren’t quite in tune with each other.

Tuning your ukulele might seem like a daunting challenge, but it can be an easy task to learn, especially when you have a digital tuner to help you. With a little practice (and trust me, you’ll be getting a *lot* of practice on this!), getting your instrument in tune can become almost automatic to you.

Additionally, the time you spend tuning your ukulele, and listening to the notes as you do so, is a great way to start developing your musical ear. You might think you don’t have much of a musician’s ear right now. But after spending a couple of months tuning your uke each time you pick it up, you’ll be surprised at how quickly you’re able to tell whether your uke is in tune.

The ABCs of Notes

As you read in Chapter 1, you play individual musical *notes* on your ukulele by striking any single string. The *pitch* of the note you play is determined by the gauge (diameter) of that string and by the tension exerted on the string. By turning a string’s tuning knob, you are adjusting the string’s tension, which changes the string’s pitch. Tightening the tuning peg raises a string’s pitch. Loosening the tuning peg lowers a string’s pitch.

Although you can raise or lower a string’s pitch to any point you like using the tuning knobs, to learn the basics of playing ukulele you need each string of your instrument to be tuned to what is known as standard tuning. After your ukulele is in standard tuning, you have a point of reference for everything,

from playing single-note melodies or cool riffs from your favorite songs to strumming out chords for those songs.

It will help, however, to know a little more about the names of notes and how they relate to each other to make tuning your ukulele easier to understand.



DEFINITION

Notes are musical sounds or tones. They also are the symbols used to indicate such tones. For the ukulele, as well as most musical instruments and music of Western music (meaning music of the Western Hemisphere), there are 12 musical note names. The **pitch** of a note is its relative position to other notes, usually described as “high” or “low” in terms of sound. Notes can share a name, but can also be different in pitch, as in the two “do” notes at the end of the “do re me fa sol la ti do” scale.

Notes in music are given names of the first seven letters of the alphabet, going from A to G as you go higher in tone. When you reach G, the note names cycle around again, so A is the note again after G, but that A is at a higher pitch (greater vibration frequency) than the A that started the sequence:

A B C D E F G A B ...

You can begin counting off notes anywhere as long as you keep them in order. For instance, you could begin with C, like this:

C D E F G A B C D ...

Of course, it would be too good to be true if that were all there was to tell! Life, and music, just doesn’t seem to work that way. Besides these seven notes, there are five additional notes that fall between some of the notes. These additional notes are called *accidentals* and are labeled as *sharps* (#) or *flats* (b). Also, each accidental has two different, yet correct, names because they fall in between notes. For instance, the accidental between C and D can be called either C# or Db.

When you raise a note (increasing the pitch a little higher), you are making it sharp; when you lower a note (decreasing the pitch a little lower), you’re making it flat.

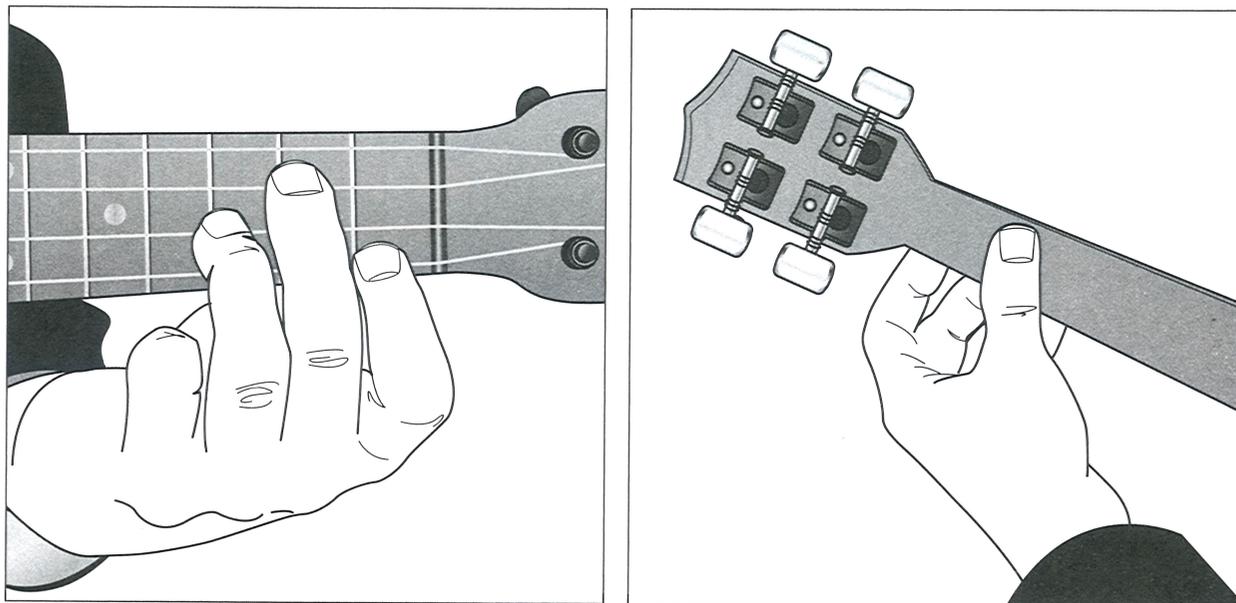


DEFINITION

To make any note **sharp** is to raise that note a half-step in tone. When you lower any given note by a half-tone, you make it **flat**. An **accidental** is a note that has been made either flat or sharp. Some accidentals share the same note but can be called by one of two names. For example, the note that is a half-step between G and A is called G# because it is a half-step higher than G. That same note also can be called Ab because it is a half-step lower than A.

Adding these five accidentals to the original seven notes (A–G), they are arranged, from low to high, like this:

C	C#/D ^b	D	D#/E ^b	E	F	F#/G ^b	G	G#/A ^b	A	A#/B ^b	B	C
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Placing your fingers on the fretboard (left), and your thumb position on the back of the neck (right).

This is especially important given the small size of the ukulele's neck. You might get away with slightly angling your left hand's fingers when you are playing single notes one at a time. But when you're playing chords or rapid successions of single notes, your fingers should be arched and on their tips to ensure you are not blunting or muting adjacent strings.

Avoid Gripping the Neck

Most ukulele players hold the uke by grasping the neck in their fretting hand. This is normal and expected, given the small size of the instrument; however, it is not the best way to hold the uke. If you can feel the lower edge of the neck of your uke along your palm, your fingers are not getting optimal placement. They are being pulled down to fret the notes, and ultimately, this will negatively affect both speed and accuracy when fretting notes.



SMOOTH STRUMMING

Do your best to keep your left hand's hold of the ukulele's neck relatively fluid. You need to be able to shift your wrist and fingers from side to side with practically no friction at all. Relax and let your thumb rest against the back of the uke's neck without locking it up in a death grip.

Keep the neck angled so your fretting hand is about chest high. Having an easy, relaxed hold on the neck will put your fingers in an optimal position to cleanly fret the notes while keeping them arched and on their tips.



FRET LESS!

Your fingers have the important job of fretting the notes cleanly. Get them into position first and then let the neck of the uke rest against the thumb. Your fingers will (and should) decide where your thumb will be. Don't let your thumb dictate where your fingers go.

Fretting Notes

When you put your finger *on a fret*, it actually means placing your finger in the middle between two frets, not on the actual fret. When fretting a note, place your finger(s) slightly closer to the body-side of your ukulele, as shown in the previous illustration.

Apply just enough pressure to press the string straight onto the fingerboard. You'll be surprised at how little pressure you need. Push the string straight onto the neck of the ukulele with your fingertips. Too much pressure pushes the string to one side or the other, which deadens the note or can even bend the string slightly, giving you a note that is out of tune.

A Quick Look at Ukulele Tablature

Your ukulele is in tune and you can hold it while sitting or standing. Now you need a little more musical information; then you will be playing! Actually, you can already play notes, but it would be good to have some idea which notes you want to play, and for that it is time to learn a bit about *tablature*.



DEFINITION

Tablature is a system for writing and reading music for fretted instruments such as ukuleles, guitars, and banjos. Horizontal lines represent the strings of your instrument and numbers written on those lines indicate which fret to play with your fingers.

Tablature, along with standard music notation (which you will read about in the next chapter), is one of the two main ways of reading ukulele music. In ukulele tablature, the notes are written on a staff of four lines (one for each string) as a series of numbers (which, depending on the type of uke you play, will usually be from 0 to 12), like this:



Track 3

0	2	0	1	3	0	2	3		
3	2	0	3	1	0	2	0		

Chapter 3, Example 1.

The four lines represent the strings of your ukulele. The top line is your first string, the A. The lowest line is your fourth string, the G. The numbers tell you which fret to place your finger on. 1 is the first fret, 2 the second, and so on. 0 means to play that string without any fingers on it—this is called an *open string*.

You read tablature from left to right, regardless of on which string a number appears. In the first line of this example, you start by playing the open C string, which is indicated by the leftmost 0 sitting on the third line. Do this by picking the C string with either the thumb or any finger of the right hand.

Then place a finger on the second fret of that same string (for now, use any left-hand finger you like) and then pick the C string again with either the thumb or a finger of your right hand.

Next, pick the open E string. Then place a finger of your left hand (the index finger will do nicely) on the first fret of the same string and pluck the E string a second time, again using either your thumb or your finger to do so. Now place another left-hand finger on the third fret of the E string and pluck the string once more with your right hand. Congratulations! You have played the first five notes of this example.

Next (following the tablature), play the open A string. Then place a finger of your left hand on the second fret of the A string and pick the string with your right hand. Finally, place a left-hand finger on the third fret of the A string and pluck the string one more time with your right hand. You've now played the entire first line of this example. If you have done this correctly, it should sound like the "Do Re Mi" scale from *The Sound of Music*. And the second line does it all in reverse, going from the highest note to lowest. You can listen to it (and play along!) on Track 3 of the CD to ensure you have it right.



FRET LESS!

The tablature numbers indicate which fret to play, not which fingers to use when playing the notes.

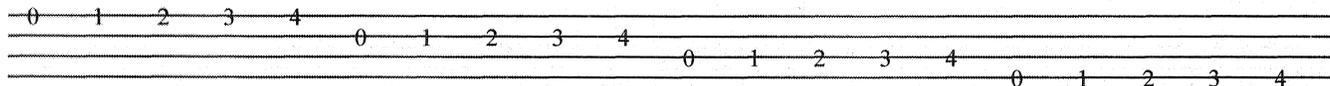
In this exercise, focus on both reading and understanding the instructions of the tablature as well as in making clean and clear-sounding notes. Do not worry about speed; right now, it is all about accuracy.

Warming Up

With this little bit of tablature under your belt, you can start with some simple warm-up exercises:



Track 4 (0:00)



Chapter 3, Example 2.

Start by striking the open A string. Then place your index finger (labeled 1 on the tablature) on the first fret of that string and play the new note (which you know to be A \sharp from your earlier reading in this chapter); then move on to the middle finger (labeled 2) at the second fret, the ring finger (3) at the third fret, and the pinky (4) at the fourth. Finally, move on and repeat this process with the remaining three strings.

Again, do not worry about speed. Concentrate on producing clean, clear, ringing notes each time you finger a fret. Listen carefully as you play. If you hear any buzzing, it is likely you are too close to, or on top of, a fret. Muted or clunky sounding notes usually indicate you are not on your fingertips and are likely pressing the string sideways along the fretboard.

Practice, Practice

The whole purpose of these warm-up exercises (which are usually called *one finger one fret* exercises) is to get your hands used to the mechanics necessary to making music on your ukulele. There are lots of variations you can do; here are some more:



Track 4 (0:18)

Use index finger on "1" Use middle finger on "2"
Use ring finger on "3" Use pinky on "4"

A musical staff with four lines. The fret numbers 1, 3, 2, 4 are written on the staff and repeated three times across the length of the staff.

A musical staff with four lines. The fret numbers 4, 3, 2, 1 are written on the staff and repeated three times across the length of the staff.

A musical staff with four lines. The fret numbers 2, 4, 1, 3, 2, 4, 1, 3, 4, 2, 3, 1, 4, 2, 3, 1 are written on the staff and repeated three times across the length of the staff.

i = index, m = middle, r = ring, l = pinky

A musical staff with four lines. The fret numbers 1 through 7 are written on the staff. Above the staff, finger assignments are listed: *i* above 1, *m* above 2, *r* above 3, *l* above 4, *i* above 5, *m* above 6, *r* above 7. Below the staff, finger assignments are listed: *i* below 1, *m* below 2, *r* below 3, *l* below 4, *i* below 5, *m* below 6, *r* below 7. The word "etc." is written above the number 3.

Chapter 3, Example 3.

The important thing is to be accurate and be sure to use each finger of your fretting hand correctly. Ultimately you are going to be using all the fingers on your left hand to play, so be sure you do so now with these exercises.

Think of these warm-up exercises as a way for your fingers to get used to your ukulele. When you do these exercises, be accurate with both hands. Make sure you pick the string you need, and be sure you are fretting each note so it rings out cleanly and clearly. Also, explore and create some warm-up exercises of your own.