

# Harp Ukulele for Therapeutic Music



*By Christina Cotruvo*



## That Doggy in the Window

This past December I presented a therapeutic music program for 25 northern Minnesota libraries. My music selections included a full-size lever harp, Reverie harp, voice, and a harp ukulele. During the program, I played and sang “How Much is That Doggy in the Window” accompanied with my harp ukulele to demonstrate therapeutic music for memory care. A woman from the audience asked to talk with me after the program as she wanted to tell me of her hospice music experience.

This was difficult for Sarah (pseudonym) to revisit and tell me about. She was godmother to a cherished niece with whom she had had many wonderful life experiences. When her niece was very young, Sarah would have her sit on her knees, and they would share songs together, including a favorite of theirs; “How Much is That Doggy in the Window.” Then at age 20 her niece developed a rapid leukemia. Sarah told me about her hospice visit to her niece’s bedside when her niece was not responsive and her time was short. Sarah sat on the bed, held her niece’s hand, and sang, “How Much is That Doggy in the Window,” as she had done so long ago. Sarah said she felt a warm stillness and saw her immobile niece had a tear trickling down her cheek, and then another. Sarah was stunned that her niece was somehow hearing and understanding the love that was being given to her. She cherished that last moment with her niece, who then passed away the next day.

I talked with Sarah about some of my music experiences in hospice and that hearing is the last to go. A few weeks later, I received an email from her thanking me for my music and how music is continuing to bring healing from her loss. She said that although she enjoyed my harp music demonstrations, the singing of the familiar tune with the gentle resonant harp ukulele brought her the most comfort.

## Seeking Overtones

In January 2011 I completed my Clinical Musician Certification Program in harp. I was not singing with or without the harp at that time and it didn’t occur to me that in the future I would, as I felt the harp was my soul instrument. I started to change my mind when I noticed memory loss residents/patients (including traumatic brain injury) would have great comfort and joy participating with the familiar music I played on the harp. But many would fall asleep or be so relaxed they were drowsy after a while. I find it difficult to sing while playing the harp, so I would keep to a less-is-more approach of playing with a steady bass beat with melody notes to keep the familiar tune easy to follow.

There were two things I noticed music therapists were enthusiastic about when I participated at a 2015 regional conference in Minneapolis. First, I noticed the singing. I was amazed at all the songs the therapists could just pull out of the air with clarity and tone. The

second thing I noticed was that although guitar is their main instrument, there were at least a hundred conference goers buying ukuleles at the vendor booths. I have never been a fan of playing the guitar, but I thought about the ukulele having only four strings and that it might be easy to learn chords and carry around. I purchased a cute checker-board top concert size ukulele while imagining my memory loss patients being awake longer to enjoy their familiar songs.

I was right. After three months of learning and practicing chords on the ukulele, I was using the ukulele with voice as therapeutic music. I then discovered that beyond the music, the anticipation and seeing an instrument is also important for the patient. The reaction to seeing a ukulele instead of a harp was different. The harp always brought an awe struck and reverent first reaction. The ukulele immediately brought smiles with anticipation of familiarity with participation instead of performance. I also noticed these reactions in memory care facilities and trauma rehabilitation centers.

But something was lacking in the ukulele sound for me. A four-string instrument with fingering on frets shortens the overtones and has less therapeutic resonance. I thought maybe a better instrument would have what was lacking, so I purchased a Martin mahogany ukulele. Although this has the perfect blend of overtones, the sound still wasn’t enough for me. I then considered trying different arrangements. When I did a Google search for “harp sheet music for ukulele,” an image of a harp ukulele appeared.

This 2.2 pound compact instrument provides the perfect package for my patients and me. This is a ukulele with a second arm that has four to six unfretted harp strings. The four ukulele strings can be nylon or fluorocarbon, the harp strings are typically metal wound classical guitar strings. The fretted neck ukulele is played the same way you would a ukulele, either picking out the melody or strumming harmony. The harp strings can be picked as a bass note or a lower tone melody note. These harp strings resonate in sympathy providing overtones the same way a harp does. I currently own an eight-string 100% carbon fiber harp ukulele made in Ireland (four harp strings, photo page 44) and a ten-string maple wood harp ukulele made in Ukraine (six harp strings, photo page 45).

## History of the Harp Ukulele

Ukulele is not the only four-string style guitar. The earliest guitars were from Persia, which were known as *chartar*, were four strings. The *Brac Tamburitza* comes from Croatia. Eastern European harp guitars are typically known as a guitar with sub bass strings. There are several theories on when and where harp guitars were created.

The most accepted, according to Duncan Robertson, is in his article in *Frets Magazine*, November, 1979:

The origin of the harp guitar dates back to the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the luthiers of Europe were looking for a replacement for the standard guitar. The first true harp guitar was produced in Paris around 1773 by a harp maker named Naderman. It had six standard fretted strings and six open bass strings.

The ukulele was adapted in Hawaii after four-string guitars were brought by Portuguese sailors. The Hawaiian style of tuning the strings is reentrant tuning. This brings a sweet harmony of the first string strummed, is higher in tone than the following two strings ending on the highest tone, instead of a scale lowest to highest like sound.

The first and best-known harp ukulele was created by transplanted Norwegian Chris Knutsen, inventor of the “One Armed Guitar.” Patented in Port Townsend, Oregon in 1896, this instrument featured a hollow arm extending out of the upper bass bout of a conventional flattop guitar—presumably to act as an additional resonating chamber. Within a year or so, Knutsen added extra bass “harp” strings to the arm. Other designs are taken from Canadian luthier Michael Dunn and the Larson Brothers (Carl & August), from 1895-1940, were renowned builders of some of the finest flat-top guitars and mandolins ever made. One of their best-

known creations was a harp guitar built for W.J. Dyer & Bros. (now commonly called “Dyer harp guitars”). Contemporary harp ukuleles come from these designs.

## Harp Ukulele Tuning

The harp ukulele is like any other fretted or strung instrument. The sound and resonance come from its shape and type of wood or main body materials, the string materials, tuners and tuning pegs, and body construction. I use my maple wood ten-string for one-on-one patient therapeutic music as the tone is softer and the six bass harp strings give me the opportunity to play a full scale. My eight-string carbon fiber harp ukulele I use for groups. Both have a pickup installed, which I use for performing.

How many notes, or tones, you can play on a ukulele depends on the number of frets on the neck. More frets allow more half steps of tones. I teach beginner ukulele classes and recommend a minimum of 15 frets on the neck. The number of harp strings depends on the maker, common is four strings. I have found harp ukuleles to be made by guitar makers with guitar players in mind. The strings are always way too stiff with the action too high. I had both of my harp ukuleles adjusted by a luthier for a gentler and more resonant tone when I play.

Ukuleles are tuned, starting from the first string that can be strummed downward, G4, C4, E4, and A4. Ukuleles, if a tenor size, can have the first string changed from a high G (G4) to a low G (G3) which takes away

Christina performs during a concert at a library.



the Hawaiian sound but provides five more notes below the next string which is C4. The G3 string sounds more guitar-like for finger picking. Both of my harp ukuleles have been changed to a low G.

The harp string tuning depends on how many strings the harp ukulele has. With six harp strings, I can descend from the G3 ukulele string to F3, E3, D3, C3, B2, and A2. The tone can be changed with each string tuner if needed, for example, playing in the key of G I would want the F3 string to be F#3 instead. With four harp strings there are fewer scale steps available. I keep to notes that are in the scale being played, for example in the key of C I set my four strings continuing down from the ukulele G3 to C3 or D3, A2, G2, and F2. This allows me to use them as accompaniment bass tones.

A recent ukulele student of mine had just returned from Boston to visit her father in the hospital and told me an ER staff person was singing and playing a ukulele and how gentle and wonderful it felt to have that music for them. With a harp ukulele, the harp strings add a bass note or sympathetic resonance. Since each ukulele fret is a half tone, there is no need to preset the ukulele strings to a key signature or have levers as with the harp. The harp strings can be preset to the tones you wish for the key signature you will play in, including its modes. To change the tone of those strings in the middle of the song would be difficult. There are some harp guitar makers who tried levers on the strings without much success. I keep to the less-is-more arrangements not relying on the very occasional tone wanting to be sharpened or flat and go to an alternate chord tone.

I create my own sheet music for both harp ukuleles so I won't forget my arrangements, but they aren't published since currently there isn't a demand. Lead sheet with the melody and chord names give an abundant resource of songs using the chord tonic note as the harp bass note. I use staff notation sheet music instead of TAB (tablature). When playing arpeggios, my fingers are already on all the chord notes on the frets and playing is a matter of picking them individually or a slow thumb strum with my strumming hand. The harp ukulele sustain is not as long as a harp, so dampening a string is rarely needed.

## The Future

Another reason why I was not happy with using the harp for memory loss patients was lugging my harp around. I live in northern Minnesota and the weather can be wicked and the winter ground and streets icy. Also, patients or groups would be so fascinated with the harp that they would keep trying to touch it, grab it, trip over it, or play it which created tense moments for me. I needed to downsize and be able to keep an instrument completely out of reach of another, unless I choose to have them try the harp. Also, without a harp's overtones right at my ear, the harp ukulele keeps the resonance at a distance allowing me to sing.

The number of hopeful future ukulele players keeps growing. My beginner ukulele classes fill up quickly. I lead a community ukulele strum group where the residents of the facility space we play in are welcome to come and listen. The majority of players are first time musicians who want to make music. They are all fascinated with my harp ukuleles and I wonder if this won't be the next step for many of them.

Because a harp ukulele is a special order item, finding one to try is difficult. I had researched online about them for a year before I found my used wood one to purchase through an online instrument store. After it arrived, I was able to try a harp ukulele for the first time. I was convinced then I should have another that was larger in tone to play for groups. I put a deposit on a new one being constructed overseas. That was two years ago and I never received my harp ukulele or saw my money again. I am pleased that my second attempt to purchase one abroad was a safe and quick transaction. I would be happy to provide comparisons and recommendations if you contact me.



## Christina Cotruvo

Living on the shore of Lake Superior in Duluth, Minnesota inspires Christina's music. The lever harps and harp ukulele bring magical music for special events. Her arrangements and recordings of Celtic, New Age, folk, ethnic, and therapeutic harp music are available through her website XinaMusic.com. She helps those with challenges with therapeutic harp and ukulele sing-alongs at medical facilities as a CCM in addition to seminars and trainings. She provides local ukulele lessons and leads the Duluth Ukulele Community Strum (DUCS) group. For more information about Christina and her work, see her story in the Summer 2016 issue of the *FHJ*.