



What do I do with a metronome?

A metronome is a simple tool but it can do a lot for beginning ukulele players. Just consider the benefits of a lowly little metronome. It will:

- Help you strum better.
- Offer some solid structure and feedback when you're practicing.
- Develop you into a more consistent player.
- Make others want to play with you.
- Give you whiter and shinier teeth...*oh, wait, that's a different infomercial...*

What is a metronome?

Simply put, it's a device that keeps time accurately and helps train you to do the same while you play. Most metronomes today are electronic, about the same size as an electronic tuner. These gizmos feature a variety of options—the “beat” can be an audible click, beep, tone or flashing light—even all of those options on one device. You can set the timing of the beat to vary the speed and the rhythm. Prices start at about \$25. I have a Korg metronome which is the same size as my Korg tuner.

You might also find one of the older, mechanical metronomes which used to be a fixture atop pianos in homes decades ago. The gentle—but authoritative—sound of the beat of one of these lovely “old school” metronomes has helped generations of musicians improve their timing.

Metronomes are also available online—and I guess they'd work well for you if you practice and play while sitting near your computer. Here are a few:

<http://www.pinkandaint.com/weirdmet.shtml>

<http://www.metronomeonline.com/>

As far as working with a metronome, one ukulele player advises that you think of it as a really good drummer who will not speed up or slow down—but the drummer only has one drum. He will show up whenever you need him, he will play at a consistent volume, he plays the songs you want and when—and he doesn't care how many times you make the same mistake or play the same passage over and over! On that same thought, you may also use the drum “track” on an electronic keyboard to perform the function of a metronome. Some people like the “drum” track sound better than the “click” of the metronome.

Why use a metronome?

Using a metronome regularly in your practicing/playing will help you build a steady and consistent tempo. It's vital to keep your counting/strumming/picking even when you play—and it's even more important when you play with others; without a good awareness of tempo, folks tend to speed up as they play a song. Nothing will frustrate others around you more (well, except for a poorly-tuned ukulele) than trying to play with someone who variously speeds up and slows down the beat at unpredictable times. When you play by yourself, poor timing may not stand out so badly but when

you're playing in a group it's your responsibility to play nicely with others—and that means playing exactly in time with those around you. If you've played with others and you find them slowly start to move away to another part of the jamming circle, it may not be that the room is cooler over there—it may be that your rhythm is “off” and it's downright difficult to stand beside you and still keep playing. Of course, it could be the efficacy of your deodorant, too...

Curt Sheller, who's written a plethora of ukulele and guitar instructional materials, defines a metronome as, “an external time device used to develop an internal time device (you).” Curt also points out that, “Rhythm and tempo are the the basic underpinning of music. They are no less essential than instruments that are in tune. Rhythm should not be taken for granted. It can be learned and refined. It has all too often been taken for granted in music lessons for anybody but drummers. Everyone in the band is responsible for keeping time.” For more tips from Curt, see his website: http://www.curtsheller.com/books_ukulele.shtml

About metronomes...

Although you can operate them with a simple beat, modern electronic metronomes are pretty complicated devices. KEEP the instruction sheet that came with it (even if it's in four languages—as long as English is one of those) to refer to; operating a metronome is pretty intuitive once you've done it a few times, but those instructions can really come in handy. On my Korg MA-30, I can set the tempo by either “tapping” in the speed I want or by referring to the beats-per-minute speed displayed on the screen. I can change the tone of the click, I can set a specific type of tempo (it even shows me the musical notation pattern that goes with the tempo) and I can mute the whole thing so I'm just watching the digital needle move back and forth. There's even an earphone plug in case I want to do all of this quietly. Modern electronic metronomes can accent “beat one” of any grouping as well as subdivide the beat into different rhythm patterns. Don't be afraid to play around with the little thing until you're comfortable with setting it up and making it do what you want it to do.

Some folks complain that “playing to the click” makes their music sound lifeless and mechanical. One teacher, however, points out that if you play right on tempo with the metronome you can effectively “bury” the click by playing on top of it perfectly. I tend to think that learning to play to tempo is an important first step in playing a lot better—if you eventually choose to push or pull the tempo to create a certain musical feeling in the song, that's fine. But learn to play in tempo first!

Convinced? Then it's time to try these metronome tips to improve your playing:

The tips below are among those offered by professional and very talented amateur ukulele players who are part of the Flea Market Music Bulletin Board. Scan through them—there are a lot of ideas here, some of them pretty basic and others more detailed.

- “I would begin practicing at 50 and gradually increase the speed as you become more comfortable with it. The metronome sometimes causes anxiety to keep up with the beats. If 50 is still too fast, set it at 40 to keep time as slow as you need to be able to maintain a steady beat.”
- “In the most basic, you can use it to click along and keep the beat, making sure that you play along in tempo. It can play a steady click, for example, 4 beats to the bar in 4/4 time, or on 2 and 4 as the drummer would play the backbeat—giving you a different feel or groove. It is great to help you play in steady time and train you to know where the beat should be.

- “It can also be utilized to help you learn a piece. Set the metronome at a tempo where you can play a piece easily, for example, 66 (these numbers represent beats per minute). Play along the passage you are trying to master. When you are able to play it regularly, move the metronome up one notch to 69. Play the passage again until fluent. Continue moving it up until at the desired speed. It is often good to work it slightly above the speed you want to have some “headroom” and be completely at ease.”
- “For a beginning player, the metronome is a great way to make sure you can make the chord changes in proper time. One very beneficial way that I use one is if I’m struggling with a certain passage in a song (happens quite often), I set the metronome at a very slow speed and play the passage perfectly or until I can do so. Then, I gradually pick up my speed.”
- “What I would do is set a good beat for a 4/4 song—something on the slowish side say, 90 bpm. Then strum a chord. One down strum per beat. Count with the strum in 4’s. After a while of doing that work in some chord changes, maybe go through a whole song without missing a beat. When that gets easy you can try an up strum on the “and’s” in “1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and...” Then work into other more complicated rhythm structures or faster tempos.”
- “A million years ago, while I attended GIT, they had us use metronomes to increase our speed in playing scales. But after playing major scales and modes at lightening speeds, it’s like, “so what?!” However, one useful aspect I learned was when learning something new, to play it super-slowly and perfect, then increase your speed up to tempo. This saves time...this way, you don’t have to reteach yourself or correct your mistakes...”
- And here’s a very specific technique, again from Curt Sheller:

One exercise I sometimes do with students to see how well they keep time is to take a common chord progression like a 12-bar blues and have then play the following:

1st time through play a chord or note on beat 1.

2nd time through play a chord or note on beat 2.

3rd time through play a chord or note on beat 3.

4th time through play a chord or note on beat 4.

This forces one to keep track of the beats. You will, with practice get to the point where you will feel where to play and the count will have been internalized to the point you will not have to consciously keep track of time.

Then try to play in the “up” beats:

1st time through play a chord or note on “and” of beat 1.

2nd time through play a chord or note on “and” of beat 2.

3rd time through play a chord or note on “and” of beat 3.

4th time through play a chord or note on “and” of beat 4.

Then mix it up and create song rhythmic patterns. A good jazz comping pattern is a dotted quarter and eighth tied to a quarter note. Do this each measure.