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## To B or B sharp: Introducing the C major method for learning the ukulele

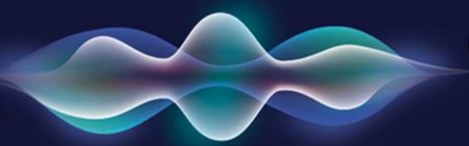
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In this article I introduce an innovative method for learning the ukulele. The method, known as the C major system, is a constructivist approach to instrumental teaching focusing on a single tonality and improvisation. It was devised between 2019 and 2020 by a professional bass musician during the peak of a profoundly serious illness in which he was incapacitated with highly restricted movement. He turned to the ukulele as a light-weight instrument to focus his creative musicianship and the outcome was the development of the system. The system is specifically for ukulele and focuses on C major tonality, song writing and learning the note names across the fretboard. Inspired by the musician's determination and creativity, and by the philosophy of the system, which raised questions about my own music improvisation and teaching practices, I began lessons in early 2021 and kept a detailed practise journal. I adopt the methodology of practitioner research and take an inquiry stance to interrogate my practice in improvisation and ukulele playing. The research occurs in the wake of my PhD completed in 2020 about creative processes for music educators. Through reflection I seek to construct an outline of the system and to connect with literature around creative process and pedagogy. The article introduces the system with respect to improvisation particularly. The system may have potential professional learning capacity for classroom music teachers working with the ukulele for personal or teaching-related ukulele practice. It also has relevance for music therapists for music in hospital settings and for other purposes of rehabilitation with practising or beginning musicians.

### Introduction

Whilst Melbourne battled lockdown in 2020 and 2021 (Australian Broadcast Commission, 2021), I witnessed a different set of life events. During the latter part of my PhD, a long-time music colleague, a professional musician of forty years, battled a serious illness. He was homebound for weeks at a time, in a type of personal lockdown, from 2019. Fiercely determined, yet unable to rehearse or perform (or to hold the bass guitar), he focused his bass-playing creative musicianship on a new instrument for him: the ukulele. The musician's admirable drive sparked an interrelated series of events in my own life, resulting in an unexpected shift of research focus from creative process for music educators – my PhD topic – to my own creative process practice.

It is with an inquiry stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) that I engage in practitioner research (Ravitch, 2014) to examine my practice of ukulele playing – not my main instrument – from the viewpoint of musician and improviser. Originally a classically trained oboe player, this altered in 2001 when I became entrenched in popular music and improvisation. As a professional wedding singer and flute player for many years, I performed improvised



instrumental solos. Other access points to improvisation have been in groove-genre rehearsals to learn electric drumkit, in playing bass guitar in blues and popular music settings and in music classroom contexts. A music teacher since 1997, I am an advocate of creativity and praxis in music education, in face-to-face or online settings. My prior experience of ukulele playing has been limited to classroom music teaching – in primary and tertiary settings – and focused on chordal work, occasional single string riffs and primarily functioning as an accompaniment to singing.

The ukulele is a prime instrument for “inclusive music activities” (Kruse, 2018, p. 604). It is affordable, lightweight, has just four strings and fosters relatively easy access for playing chords and singing along instantaneously. The ethnomusicological background of the ukulele is rich and diverse (Tranquada & King, 2012). The ukulele features in music therapy (Negrete, 2021), music in the community (Giebelhausen & Kruse, 2018; Perlmutter, 2015b; Reese, 2019) and for ensemble playing (Perlmutter, 2013). The ukulele has gained popularity in music classrooms in recent decades (Kruse, 2018) with prior prevalence in Canadian music programs (Szego, 2015). One method is to “begin ukulele instruction by teaching songs to sing with chords” (Giebelhausen, 2016, p. 39) such as in popular music styles with standard beginner chords of C, F and G (Giebelhausen, 2016) similar to my own prior teaching practice.

In this article I introduce the system through scholarly reflection (Ravitch, 2014) and position the system as a complementary method for learning the ukulele. The article enables us to ‘see’ a different voice in music education. That voice is present in the descriptions of the previously unheard innovation of the C major system, shared through permission and encouragement from the musician (his choice of pseudonym). My description is subjective, and highly person and context specific (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). The article seeks to generate interest, “dialogue and inquiry across communities” (Ravitch, 2014, p. 5) within the music education field. The musician’s dedication, musicianship and the creativity inherent in his approach to ukulele playing is refreshing and insightful. It links practical and theoretical aspects of music and provides improvisation support for learners of any age group. The melding of musician-improviser is exemplified in his practice.

### **Methodology**

I adopt practitioner research (Ravitch, 2014) to investigate my professional practice as a musician and improviser in exploration of the C major system on the ukulele. Ravitch (2014) identifies practitioner research as a methodology that involves “systematic research procedures and practices that foster critical reflection and action in the context of professional practice” (p. 5). I ‘critically reflect’ on my practise sessions notes to render a description of the system and to secondarily consider my creative process experiences in connection with literature. In following, I ‘act’ on these reflections by honing composition ideas and other educational prompts that emerge in my rendering of the system. The research into my music practice informs my philosophies of teaching and learning, and my research interest in

creative processes for music educators. The three viewpoints are subjectively and inextricably linked.

Practitioner research has been adopted in resonance with “generating local, practice-based knowledge that is deeply contextualized and meaningfully embedded in a specific milieu” (Ravitch, 2014, p. 5). The C major system reflects local and contextual knowledge emanating from the practices of a professional musician living in the outer northern suburbs of Melbourne, Australia. The context of the development of the system, which occurred during and following incapacitation with serious illness – in the backdrop of lockdown – hones the milieu in which the system may be placed, that is: instrumental and improvisational development for any learner of ukulele including others in similarly physically restrictive circumstances. Whilst I cannot relate to the physical incapacitation potentiality of the system, which I suggest is worthy of deep research, I view it with an improvisation and self-directed practise focus

Inquiry stance is integral in practitioner research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Ravitch, 2014). The philosophy and literal sound of the musician’s playing resulting from the system intrigued me and prompted questions about my own practice as an improviser (why don’t I ever ‘noodle’?) and as a ukulele player (in classrooms) ‘how can I incorporate finger picking into my own ukulele playing?’ The inquiry stance prompted deeper questions, ‘how can I improve my ukulele playing?’ and ‘how can I learn more about the system?’ which led me to engage in practitioner research.

### **Introducing the C major system**

The system has a constructivist philosophy (Lincoln & Guba, 2013) with elements of inquiry learning (Murdoch Wilson, 2003) and self-directed learning (Gülten Feryal & Kiyemet, 2016). The analogy of character roles in narrative (Keen, 2003) is useful to explain the interrelationship of components in the system. C major is undoubtedly the protagonist, the main character, representing the full tonality of C major including the relative modes. Song writing is the confidant or sidekick (a main role in this scenario) of C major, ever-present alongside the protagonist. The antagonist – a positive version of the traditional – is the underlying inquiry question: “What are the notes of the ukulele across the entire fretboard?” The tertiary characters are style, genre or influence, present in the prior or current experiences of the player and interacting with the main characters (an element of the system pursued in other writing).

### **C major: The protagonist**

The beginning of the system is C major.

1. The ukulele is a C instrument. The strings of the ukulele are tuned to a C6 chord. The tuning of the ukulele supports playing in the tonality of C major. Play and learn the names of each open string.
2. The pattern of C major is introduced on the C string by playing up the fretboard, where a tone is the distance of two frets, and the semi-tone is the distance of one fret. The pattern (to be memorised) is demonstrated on the ukulele and verbally described:

- tone, tone, semi-tone, tone, tone, tone, semi-tone (referred to herewith as TTSTTTS) or, with the terms 'whole-step' and 'half-step'.
3. Play the pattern of TTSTTTS up the fretboard along the C string. The semitones E to F and B to C, are emphasised for memory support for students new to the pattern. The pattern is learnt aurally, visually and by verbalising the note names. Ensure the pattern is understood, including the open string to the second fret as a tone. The pattern is the basis of the system.
  4. Two new concepts are introduced and are closely intertwined. First, song writing (the confidant) is introduced as one explores the pattern. Allow musical ideas to emerge. Any style. Teacher demonstration is useful here to show potentiality. Secondly, the inquiry question (antagonist) is introduced as a long-term goal but persistent guide: "What are the notes of C major across the entire fretboard?" Start the process of 'finding' the notes, on the E string (E phrygian) by working in the C major pattern along the string. Explore the sound; create melodies by 'finding' the notes. Continue with this on the A string (A aeolian) and the G string (G mixolydian). The inquiry focus is enacted alongside the song writing element.
  5. It becomes clear that the beginning and end of C major is not the note C. Rather, there is no end, only the reoccurring pattern of TTSTTTS starting and finishing whenever and wherever the player chooses, retaining and reinforcing the pattern. The modes are viewed primarily through the pattern of C major, starting in different places in the pattern. The modes are also named as the modes.
  6. One can always locate the note names across the instrument once one knows the C major pattern and how to find 'C' on each string.

Discussion: The musician chose to stay in the key of C major – the tonality of the instrument. The musician decided against learning the two five ones in every key and all the relevant scales and modes, which he describes as his usual approach to learning an instrument. He chose deliberately to stay within the tonality of the ukulele. I remarked later in my journal that the ukulele was 'born' for C major.

### **Song writing: The confidant or sidekick**

Ever-present in the system, song writing is positioned as the confidant or sidekick of C major. The protagonist and confidant support the development of one another. After initially finding (playing and naming) the notes of TTSTTTS starting on the C string, song writing is introduced.

Akin to noodling or improvisation, this element has been called 'song writing' by the musician in application to the system. Emergent songs in the system are identified as a type of 'feel', a word derived from jazz, associated with rhythm when referred to as a 'swing feel' or 'triplet feel' (Datseris et al., 2019). The musician has been a professional jazz and swing player. He borrows the concept of 'feel' and applies it to all songs, across genres. As such, each song represents a specific 'feel' which goes beyond only rhythm to encompass character also. In a good performance, the 'feel' is identifiable the moment the song begins. As a professional wedding singer, the understanding of a song's 'feel' was essential to convey

song meaning and to instantly spark audience recognition of the song's inherent character, such as joy, celebration or longing. One is encouraged to go beyond politely strumming through a chord chart towards seeking to express and convey the 'feel' of the song.

### **Inquiry question, "What are the C major notes names across the fretboard?": The antagonist**

This section is more significant as I explore song writing in correlation to noodling to articulate the function of the inquiry question (antagonist). Song writing is placed in the system as a form of focused 'noodling' - an improvisatory music making experience described poignantly as "a pastime that's potentially rich with musical benefits – a-discipline, or maybe non-discipline, that can reveal hidden reserves of creativity and lead to previously unseen directions" (Perlmutter, 2015a). For years I have observed (and encouraged) musicians and students to noodle and yet I wondered why this marvellous and involving experience never happened to me, thus prompting my inquiry stance.

In the three practice sessions following my first lesson, I avidly wrote down every tiny composition or 'song writing' moment as they occurred, such as short two bar motifs or two-string plucked chordal melodies. These musical ideas began to emerge so often, however, that I gave up writing them down. In a subsequent lesson with the musician, as I was playing a self-set challenge to create a descending arpeggiated pattern in E phrygian across the fretboard in a classical inspired/popular music ballad 'feel', the musician observed and offered a friendly diagnosis: I was noodling. I confessed to have given up writing these little ideas down. He replied, "That is because you realise that there will always be a music idea, they just happen. Once you start, they are always there. That is noodling."

The noodling anecdote demonstrates the inquiry question in action – the player is always seeking to know the notes of C major across the entire fretboard. The combination of song writing with the inquiry question also urges one to pose smaller problems or invent exercises on more 'local' levels such as the descending arpeggios in E phrygian. Problem finding (Runco, 1994) is encouraged in the system. In these scenarios, I would enjoy finding solutions to invented challenges which would inevitably lead to other musical ideas to either pursue or ignore. The inquiry question led to playing across the fretboard, up the neck and across octave ranges. The concepts of song writing, noodling, finding the C major notes across the fretboard enable a self-propelling experience in one's practise routine which the musician has called progressive exploration.

There are multiple rationales for learning the note names of C major across the ukulele. First, one may confidently play modes across the fretboard without a 'wrong' note which increases the scope of improvisation and composition. A second rationale is chordal construction. One experiments to find chords through song writing (noodling) and in following, one names the newly 'found' chords through knowing (or decoding via the system) the notes of the fretboard. Chordal improvisation is experimental and interesting. The musician explains, "the song writing ability of finding chords is akin to exploring a new town, of building a map in one's mind." Chordal 'constructivism' supports timbral choice (alternate chord positions) and

easily leads to the concept of inversions. Players new to chordal structure and inversions may find this an enjoyable way to 'construct' that knowledge. I found it empowering to create chords rather than just read the chord symbol charts. A third rationale is that knowing the notes of the instrument is important towards knowing the instrument one is learning.

### **Creative processes and pedagogy**

Providing a structure for creative work and initiating problem finding are integral to the C major system. Csikszentmihalyi and Custodero (2002) speak of music composition as a "personal balance between artistic freedom and perceived order – imposed by the structural characteristics of the musical content and by conscious choices to shape that content" (p. xv). The structural characteristics are highly evident in the system, as are the conscious choices to develop and explore musical ideas, demonstrating "thought and action" (Lubart, 2018, p. 3) in the creative process. The emergent ideas are at times transient (Shamas & Maker, 2018), such as noodling, yet they contribute to skill development, repertoire of ideas and composition.

Within the overall structure, one sets smaller challenges or exercises – a type of 'problem finding' (Runco, 1994) or 'problem posing' (Murdoch & Wilson, 2003) which is important to the system to guide technique development. This connects to inquiry learning where "the students are both problem posers and problem solvers" (Murdoch Wilson, 2003, p. 1), and brings to mind Csikszentmihalyi and Custodero's (2002) poignant statement of the teacher's role to devise ways for "students to create musical challenges for themselves" (p. xvi). When the musician was a child, he would climb the Norfolk pines that stood in a row along the fence of his primary school. High up in the branches, he would devise imaginative challenges: the earth had turned to lava forcing him to move from tree to tree via the branches only. In a less daring manner, this is a great analogy for the challenges one sets oneself within the system.

Self-directed learning is pertinent to the discussion about progressive exploration. As a pedagogical approach, it has been described as "autodidactic, self-regulated learning, self-planned learning, autonomous learning and independent learning" (Gülten Feryal & Kiyem, 2016, p. 104). I experienced these learning traits during my practise sessions and attribute them primarily to the system.

### **Potential of the C major system**

Ukulele is often taught primarily with a focus to sing and play chords. The C major system may provide complementary learning experiences to support these chordal methods. The description and reflection of learning experiences may be useful to music teachers to support their own creative process practice and skill development on the ukulele. The system is open-ended yet adequately structured so that once taught, it may stimulate self-driven practise routines. It has capacity for a range of styles and musical interests (the scope of which will be discussed in future writing), it supports individual music making and creating, and prompts chordal players to incorporate finger picking. The method has a strong theoretical base grounded in constructivism to support students to develop music language and an understanding of tonality – aurally and theoretically. In the backdrop of lockdown, the system



provided a peaceful and fun approach to playing the ukulele. I gained a new understanding of 'noodling', a renewed love of instrumental music practise and am dabbling in composition. I am indebted for the experience.

### **Conclusion**

The article introduces the C major system as a new method for learning the ukulele. The system was devised by a professional musician during a serious and incapacitating illness. The system focuses on playing the ukulele in a single tonality, exploring song writing (through improvisation) and learning the note names across the fretboard. Practitioner research has been adopted as the methodology. I take an inquiry stance as a musician and improviser and write with a post-doctoral lens of creative process for music educators. The article aims to render an introductory outline of the system drawn from reflections on my learning experiences. The system is underpinned by constructivist and inquiry pedagogy and features a self-driven practise technique called 'progressive exploration'. The system inspires improvisation, composition and self-directed learning. It has implications for music education in any setting to support improvisation and practical music experiences. The C major system has further implications for learners who may be incapacitated through illness to spur individual practise routines, and ultimately, to foster a love of improvisation and composition, no matter the circumstances, through playing the ukulele.