

Bass Ukulele

Stevens Bass Ukelele

Stevens Custom Guitars

Bob Battersby tests a bass uke from Germany.

In the last few years the music world has been colonised by a array of small but highly infectious instruments that now appear on stage with almost every act you can wave an Americana, folk or acoustic stick at. I speak, of course, of the ukulele. From the £5 soprano right up to the £3000+ luthier-built models, there is a uke for everyone, including bass players. Manufacturers Kala were first out of the blocks with a ukelele bass, dubbed the U-Bass, which deployed polyurethane strings (first seen on the Ashbory bass ? remember them?) to achieve an almost double bass sound. However, over in Munich, Stevens Custom Guitars have decided to create a more conventional electro-acoustic bass ukulele by using custom-made acoustic strings to give it the feel and ?playability? of an acoustic bass. Let?s have at it.

Build Quality

Lifting the bass ukelele out of its case, I was struck by how solid it felt: not heavy, but well built, with a balance point at the heel, and a smooth, semi-matte finish that, in my opinion, looks better than the highly varnished finish on many ukes. Both the standard model, which I was testing, and the cutaway model, have nicely figured bearclaw sitka spruce tops, while the body, sides and neck are mahogany. The fingerboard, bridge, custom-made bridge pins and Schaller tuner buttons are ebony. The top is X-braced, with additional bracing on the back and, although there is no adjustable truss rod, the neck feels firm and well seated. A nice touch is the ebony faceplate on the headstock and the ebony body binding.

The overall impression is of fine, understated craftsmanship. Amplification comes via a bridge-mounted piezo pickup, routed out through an endpin jack socket.

Sounds And Playability

Well, it?s loud! That?s unplugged, straight-out-of-the-box loud. Perhaps not quite loud enough against a guitar, but certainly against a uke, or for practising. The custom-made Pyramid strings tuned up easily and the intonation was spot on. Playing height is comfortable at the 12th fret. The strings are nylon core wrapped with copper and silver, similar in construction to double bass strings, and they feel a little strange if you are used to playing roundwounds or, in my case, flatties. The heavy E and A strings don?t lend themselves to aggressive plucking or picking, but then this instrument isn?t really aimed at the hardcore market ? although I would love to see what Flea could do with it. I found that the strings need to be played in for a couple of hours to settle the tension, but once there, they stay in tune remarkably well, and adapting my style to the short scale was surprisingly easy. Plugging it in reveals the beast within; this sounds like a bass: a real bass. The custom strings give a full, fat sound, while the well-braced body adds a nice woody warmth. Warming up at a gig, I noticed that everyone was looking around for the bass player, until they realised that the deep rumbling was coming out of this little box. Perhaps the only shortcoming is that it lacks an onboard preamp,

although Stevens are planning to offer one in the future. I found my LR Baggs GigPro indispensable when running straight into a PA.

Conclusion

This is an exceptional bass and would grace anyone's collection. Addictively playable, it can't fail to put a smile on your face, and it will intrigue and amuse your audience. It is certainly the first ukulele-derived bass that I have played that actually plays and sounds like a bass. I love it, but like all love affairs I have the odd little gripe. It needs a preamp, inboard or outboard, to get the best out of it and, for a finger player, strap buttons to attach a standard strap would make it easier to play. It is also reassuringly expensive

- but then, you're worth it.