

Queen of the Uke

Cynthia Kinnunen leading a four-string movement in the Royal City

BY ANDREW VOWLES
PHOTOGRAPHY • NICK IWANYSHYN

Talk about a magical little instrument. Last spring, Desirée Dawson of Surrey, B.C., strummed her ukulele to the top of CBC Music's Searchlight contest. Months later, 12-year-old Grace Vander-Waal earned the golden buzzer on America's Got Talent with her self-composed ukulele rendition of "I Don't Know My Name." Now, in Guelph, the Ukulele Queen is busy using the "little instrument that could" to weave her own kind of spell among growing numbers of uke aficionados.

That's Cynthia Kinnunen, a one-woman evangelist for an instrument that has gone in and out of fashion over the past century but whose current incarnation appears to have found traction locally and worldwide.

By day, Kinnunen works full-time at the University of Guelph, where last fall she won a United Way talent show with a four-string rendition of "Ex's and Oh's" by Elle King. After hours, Kinnunen teaches ukulele, runs the Royal City Ukulele Ensemble and is planning the first-ever Guelph ukulele festival for Sept. 30. Along the way, she's reconnected with some of her earliest musical experiences and found a way to give voice to her inner musician.

Kinnunen variously calls the uke a connector, a community-builder and an entry point for anyone who had pretty much given up hope of ever learning to play a musical instrument. It's small, but it's crafty and even subversive, she says.

"It finds its way into people's hands. It has a humble attitude that can slide under the radar. People get excited and feel like they've discovered it," she says.

Not that there's anything tiny or humble about Kinnunen's plans for it. "My big audacious dream is to see a ukulele in every household in Guelph, maybe Kitchener-Waterloo, too."

Depending on your age and musical tastes, the ukulele may conjure up a few different things. Maybe you picture Tiny Tim tiptoeing through the tulips with his four-string in hand. Or maybe Elvis in "Blue Hawaii" or Marilyn Monroe in "Some Like It Hot."

For some, the uke's distinctive high-pitched twang evokes the grass skirts and Hawaiian shirts of its birthplace on the Pacific islands, where it was adapted in the late 1800s from a small Portuguese guitar called a machete. Most of us call it a "yoo-ka-lay-lee," but Kinnunen uses the softer Hawaiian pronunciation: "oo-koo-lay-lay."



Fast forward to the 2000s, and it's a wider contemporary crowd that has adopted the instrument. In 2011, Eddie Vedder brought his Pearl Jam grunge sensibility to a solo album featuring only ukulele tunes. In the same year, Amanda Palmer released a punk-styled encomium titled "Ukulele Anthem." The instrument has featured in tunes by Ingrid Michaelson and in "Riptide" by Vance Joy.

Today you can find ukulele sheet music for many of radio's Top 40 pop tunes – like the songs that Kinnunen has brought one Sunday evening to a "kick-up" class for advanced players at Fionn MacCool's pub in Guelph.

In an upstairs room adorned with dart boards and Guinness ale posters, Kinnunen sways up front, alternately singing lyrics and calling out chords to seven women seated at round tables. Cradling their instruments, they strum

along in unison, following her chord-chart handouts: "House of Gold" by Twenty One Pilots, Joni Mitchell's "Big Yellow Taxi," "Ho Hey" by the Lumineers. She hands around new music for "Weather With You" by Crowded House – "I have to make everyone learn Neil Finn, that's my big challenge in life," says Kinnunen, referring to the Crowded House musician.

Between group and private lessons for both uke and piano, she teaches music for about 20 hours a week under her CynthiaK Music moniker. "I have to turn people away for lessons and classes," she says.

On this night she has taught two hour-long ukulele sessions back to back. It's nearly 8 p.m. and she hasn't eaten dinner yet, but she smiles: "I get energy from people making music."

As the women pack up their instruments, Kinnunen calls out, "Make sure you take

your sticker." Everyone loves stickers, she confides – including herself.

Among the decals on her own uke case is one for the Six String Nation guitar project. That one hearkens back to an initiative more than a decade ago by CBC Radio's Jowi Taylor to build an all-Canadian guitar. Looking for something to represent Thunder Bay's Finnish community – home to the largest Finnish expatriate population in the world – he asked Kinnunen for a recommendation. You have to get something from the Hoito, she said, referring to a landmark co-op restaurant run since 1918 at the Finnish community hall in town. Taylor ended up using pieces of a wooden soup paddle to fashion his guitar's internal struts.

It was while growing up on the Lake Superior shore that Kinnunen developed a love of music. Her dad

was a concert promoter in Thunder Bay and Minnesota; as a youngster, she saw numerous acts from Kiss and Alice Cooper to Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen and Blue Oyster Cult.

Her early musical training involved ukulele lessons during Grades 5 and 6 music class. Leaving the uke behind, she went on to play the piano, as well as flute, oboe and bassoon. She majored in piano at Lakehead University and took a diploma in arts management on the side.

Since graduating in 1997, she has worked in fundraising and marketing for various organizations, including the University of Waterloo and the Princess Margaret Hospital Foundation in Toronto.

During a marketing stint at the Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony in 1998, she met Ben Coulson, then completing graduate studies in engineering at Waterloo. Along with other "music nerds," she was on an

electronic discussion board about Neil Finn, the Crowded House frontman, when she answered a call-out from Coulson, a bass player who was looking for other musicians to jam. They now live in Guelph with three children aged 9, 11 and 14.

Says Coulson: "She just loves music, all kinds – classical, opera, heavy metal, rock. I haven't seen any kind of musical style she can't latch onto. She has an amazing ear. . . . She can pick out a melody and play it the first time on the piano or the ukulele. I've been playing for 30-plus years and I'm still in awe of that."

Her ear may have been acute, but Kinnunen's heart was more ambivalent about music's place in her life. Growing up with a musical extended family and Finnish folk melodies, she had felt a tug right from childhood. "I grew up with music, but I was unsure. I knew I wasn't going to be a performer, and I wasn't sure how to make

it work." Arts management at least connected her with music: besides that Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony stint, she worked in the summer music program at Toronto's Harbourfront Centre.

Going back as far as their dating days, she and Coulson had more than a few discussions – "heated conversations," he calls them – about her soul-searching.

About six years ago, Kinnunen started seeing and hearing that childhood instrument being played all over in TV commercials and YouTube performances and in songs by mainstream rockers. There was also "The Mighty Uke," a 2010 documentary film about the instrument's resurgence.

"Finding the ukulele again really drew me back into the whole musical sphere," she says. "I credit the ukulele for bringing hands-on music back into my life."

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This time, she intended not just to play but also to share the instrument with others. “I’m a reluctant performer, I’d rather be teaching.”

Kinnunen started more or less where she began years earlier, by volunteering to run a program at her kids’ elementary school in Guelph. When 50 students showed up for the first class, she figured she was onto a promising thing.

Three years ago, she began the Royal City Ukulele Ensemble for adult players. Today 22 members – all but one of them women – meet for weekly rehearsals and occasional concerts. Now the group is planning the inaugural uke fest at the end of September.

The one-day event will feature workshops and performances, including a concert by James Hill, a Juno-nominated composer and teacher who lives near Halifax and runs a teacher certification program called “The Ukulele Way.” Earlier he wrote a method book series along with J. Chalmers Doane, a former school board supervisor considered the Canadian “father” of the instrument, whose original methods were the basis for

Kinnunen’s own grade-school lessons back in Thunder Bay.

Kinnunen expected to complete Hill’s teacher certification course by this summer. Hill says, “She has that quiet charisma that makes her a good leader. She is clearly smitten with the ukulele, which is primary for doing good work with the instrument.”

“It’s about bringing music to people,” Coulson says. “She’s found a passion for that, wanting people to explore their musicality.”

A self-taught guitarist, Coulson plays double bass during ukulele ensemble concerts. He’s also picked up the four-stringer at home with Kinnunen and their kids for occasional ukulele jam sessions.

“Cynthia rubs off on us that way,” he says.

He acknowledges lingering anti-uke stigma and even snobbery, particularly among the classical crowd. “I think people aren’t sure whether to take it seriously or not. People think of Tiny Tim stuff from back in the day.”

Coulson says Kinnunen “always worries that people will take away the idea that it’s a kitschy kids’ instrument. People are

Cynthia Kinnunen leads the Royal City Ukulele Ensemble during a rehearsal at Arbour Trails, a seniors residence at Village by the Arboretum in Guelph.

realizing finally it’s a real instrument.”

It’s no toy but it is accessible, says Denise Fell. One of the players in that kick-up session at Fionn MacCool’s, she began taking group lessons with Kinnunen last fall.

“The ukulele is very portable, for a beginner it’s friendly to play,” says Fell. From strumming or plucking, to playing melody or harmony, to learning chords, she says, “you can pick it up and play it immediately.”

Carolyn McLeod is among the dozen or so inaugural members of the Royal City ensemble. Now with nearly twice as many members, the group rehearses at a seniors centre in Guelph, often luring residents to sing along with standards such as “Ain’t She Sweet” and “Five Foot Two.”

“They dance by with their walkers,” says McLeod. “It’s one of those happy instruments.”

Unlike playing a solo instrument, such as the piano, she says, strumming a ukulele attracts a ready-made social network of enthusiasts.

“I think that’s what most people enjoy the most. Cynthia can get you really excited about it.” At the same time, adds McLeod, “It’s a way to escape – it’s my stress relief. I can unwind, sit outside with a glass of wine and my uke, and just melt the stress.”

Not only is the ukulele accessible, says Kinnunen, but it’s also versatile. That applies to its range – ukes echo choral voices from soprano to bass – and to its use in varied settings. Her ensemble has played at porch parties in Guelph and Waterloo, and performed for the 40th anniversary of the Guelph Arts Council. Kinnunen recently completed a three-year term as an arts council board member and president.

Earlier this year, the ukulele group teamed up with the Royal City Ambassadors barbershop singers for a benefit concert for the Chalmers Community Services Centre.

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Says Kinnunen: "Who would have thought: barbershoppers and ukulele."

The instrument might even be a bit of a healer, she says. Last year, one resident at that retirement home asked the ensemble to record a version of Dolly Parton's "Jolene," renamed "Ghislaine" for his wife who was living with Parkinson's and dementia. The group recorded six songs for him on a CD that he later played for his wife. Quoted in an article in the retirement home's newsletter, the man said, "At first she had a quizzical look. She could hear her name and then all of a sudden she was just smiling ear to ear."

Kinnunen says ukulele beginners need not spend a lot on an instrument. You can pick up an entry-level uke at music stores for about \$50, although more advanced players might be looking to spend \$300 to \$500 for higher-quality materials – say, exotics such as koa wood or spalted maple – and other features.

Kinnunen has amassed some 20 instruments, including a number for her classes. Recently she spent \$3,500 on a custom electric model fashioned from myrtle hardwood by Mya-Moe in Washington State. More ukuleles are available today in area music shops, where customers are snapping up instruments, music books and other uke paraphernalia.

Ken Wilson, owner of Octave Music Centre in Guelph, says Vedder's "Ukulele Songs" album marked a turning point. "We sell more ukuleles than electric guitars now," Wilson says.

At Guelph Music downtown, owner Darren Young points out a \$250 Fender model: "That's the uke that Eddie Vedder played." Music book racks contain everything from singalong collections to chart hits to the Ukulele in the Classroom series by Hill and Doane.

"You can get a Metallica uke book," says Young. "I sell it every time I get it."

One Saturday afternoon this year, Dan and



"I credit the ukulele for bringing hands-on music back into my life."

CYNTHIA KINNUNEN

Elaine Salter were perusing the uke rack at Guelph Music. The couple learned to play on entry-level instruments by following YouTube demos, and Dan was now seeking a bigger uke. Elaine played guitar for a while but says she found the uke easier to pick up. Their interest was piqued when one of their two grown sons acquired the instrument.

What type of music is Elaine Salter playing? "The Wheels on the Bus; 'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star,'" she laughs. "We want to play with our grandkids."

At least a few of those music store customers are coming from classes and sessions led by Kinnunen. Says Coulson: "I know I'm a little biased. What I see happening in Guelph, I feel like Cynthia is driving a lot of it. When I first came, there were no ukuleles in music stores. Now every single one has a rack of ukuleles in it."

That reflects a wider phenomenon, says

Hill: "There's no question that the ukulele is growing." Contrasting its current popularity with short-lived uke revivals during the early 1920s and the 1960s, Hill says, "It's not going away this time. There's an appetite and hunger for music-making in a group."

For Kinnunen, the "group" even extends to work. She keeps a couple of ukuleles in her office for occasional noontime jam sessions with colleagues in the Ontario Veterinary College.

Since mid-January, Kinnunen has aired a weekly series of instructional videos called Tiny Tips on YouTube. The two- to four-minute segments have covered such topics as strumming and tuning, playing chords and chucking, which is a form of uke percussion. She began the series to commemorate a university colleague whose sudden death early this year cut short the colleague's plan to post weekly videos as a "vlog challenge" for 2017.

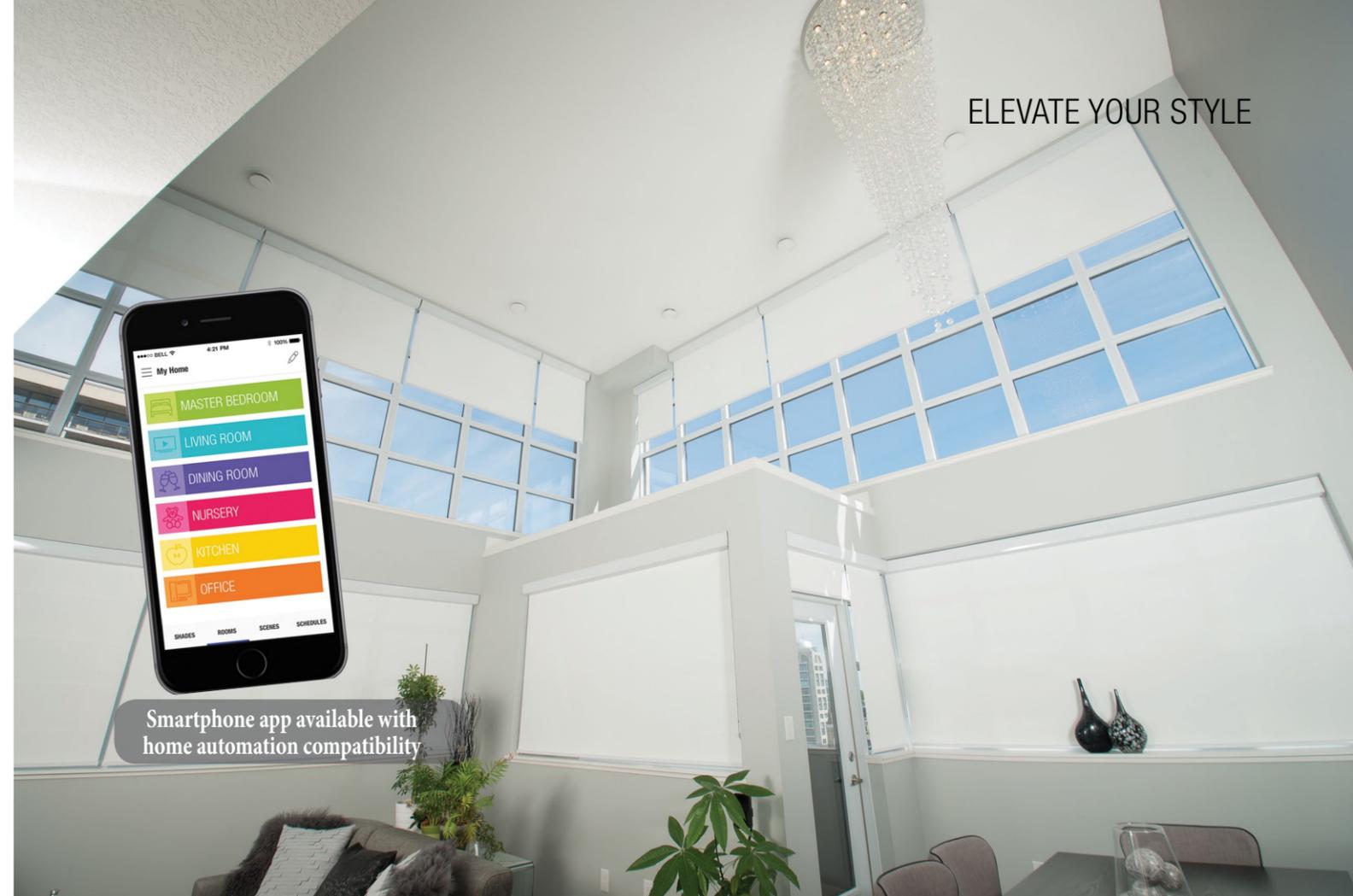
Emphasizing that she enjoys her full-time work, Kinnunen says she has managed to find a balance between vocation and avocation. Referring to her varied teaching and ensemble gigs, she says: "A lot of opportunities are starting to present themselves. I haven't felt ready to flip the switch and say all music."

For now, that reclaimed childhood instrument might be weaving its own kind of magic by helping to satisfy a deep-seated yearning, one that Kinnunen is convinced is shared by many of her students and ensemble members.

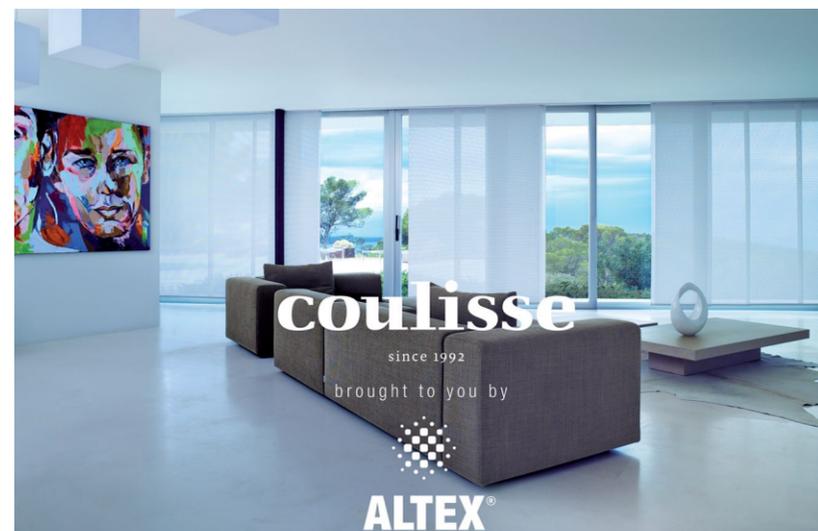
"It's good for our souls these days," she says. "We're so caught up in technology, politics, a crazy world. Music has healing power."

Earlier this year, while listening to the Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony perform the seventh symphony of the Finnish composer Jean Sibelius, Kinnunen found herself weeping.

"It's almost like food," she says. "I don't know what I would do without music in my day." 



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