

Eight Pieces by Ferdinando Carulli from Op.121 Adapted for the Ukulele

Introduction

I was at a conference earlier this year and there was a short, but lively, discussion on whether one transcribes, arranges or adapts a piece of music from one instrument to another. The jury is still out on that score but I rather fancy my process is one of arranging and adapting. Transcribing implies (to me at least) a certain purity of moving the notes of a piece written for one instrument onto a different instrument without any changes. That includes maintaining the key, not moving any of the notes up or down an octave, and not altering any of the harmony by adding or subtracting notes. That's a tall order especially when transferring a piece written for six strings onto just four. Puff! Something has to give. So, I'm not even going to try and pretend I'm anything but a musical magpie. I collect shiny things, take them away and build my own nest.

I thought it might be fun to write a blog exploring my arranging process using Carulli's Waltzer Op.121 No.1 as a case study. Perhaps it's more of a self critique than any attempt at justification. Going from six strings to four is always going to be a challenge. Even worse when the 4th string is re-entrant. Shock! Horror! No bass. Something has to give. Cut. Chop. Change. Shift. Pick. Pluck. Plink. If you don't like my approach then feel free to stick your noble nose in the air and make your own arrangements, or should I say transcriptions. If you do enjoy playing these pieces then I hope my thoughts might help and inspire you to do some of your own arrangements.

Anyone who has followed my work over the last 14 years will know that my ukulele exploits began with *The Little Book of Carulli*. Over the years I've done several more Carulli books (all downloadable as PDFs). It's beginning to feel like all my ukulele roads lead back to Carulli. May 2026 and here we are again. This time I'm focusing on *24 Pieces for Guitar Opus 121*. My goal is adapt the first eight pieces to play on the ukulele. Which ukulele? Well, I thought I might do one version for the high G ukers and another version for my baritone friends. Inevitably there are similarities ~ four strings for one. But there are sufficient differences (linear tuning versus re-entrant) to inspire me to consider the unique qualities of each instrument and create separate arrangements. That's my aim. Let's see what happens...

First of all. Why is Carulli so special? Good question. Simple answer: I love his music. Well, let's be honest. I never really liked playing Carulli on the guitar ~ which btw was Carulli's main instrument. But early into my ukulele exploits I discovered that his simple, didactic pieces work really well on the humble four stringer. At that time (around 2012) I was struggling to find repertoire for classical ukulele. In desperation I picked up one of my old

guitar books and tried playing some of the Carulli pieces on my new soprano ukulele. Voila! They actually sounded really good. Woohoo! Just a few modifications and I soon realised I had stumbled on the ideal miniature studies for any budding classical ukulele enthusiast, like me. I used six of my arrangements to create *The Little Book of Carulli*. I approached a publisher. Got rejected. Sad face. A friend then told me to self publish. I learnt about Gumroad and Payhip and how you could sell PDFs from these sites. Of course, they take a small commission. They also take care of taxes. All in all it felt like a win win situation. I thought I might sell a couple of booklets. I don't know how many people have downloaded this, and my other ebooks, but suffice to say I'm still creating new books. I like the format (PDF) and I like that I receive most of income.

Let's pause to consider my all time favourite TV show. That is Star Trek TNG from the 90s. That's the series with Captain Picard ~ Make It So ~ whose arch enemy is the dreaded Borg. I found the Borg (nothing to do with Swedish tennis stars) genuinely terrifying. The Borg operated as cybernetic hive mind that whizzed across the universe, in a cube shaped ship (as you do), assimilating all life and technology they encountered. Their chilling catch cry: "resistance is futile" heralded their arrival. Well, when it comes to adapting Carulli I sometimes feel like the Borg Queen merrily assimilating all the Carulli pieces I encounter. Hm. I guess you have to be a Trekkie to appreciate the analogy. Anyway...engage...

Carulli (1770-1841) was one of the early masters of the guitar and his music remains an essential part of the classical guitar curriculum ~ probably why I never played much of his music! In his day Carulli was a renowned performer and teacher who never explored the galaxy but was a fan, or so I hear, of Earl Grey tea. Carulli's deep understanding of the fretboard and the technique required for navigating it, are reflected in his methods and didactic works. My rationale was simple. Since the classical ukulele style is lacking in resources, why not assimilate some material from the guitar? After all, nearly two hundred years on and Carulli is still whizzing through the galaxy. Btw, I made up that bit about Earl Grey.

Ah! I hear a little clink of dissent. *She's playing the ukulele like a guitar*. Well folks, that *is* basically what it *is* ~ a little guitar. Look over your shoulder and about 400 years ago the guitar had four strings and a smaller body. Oh! hello Mr Baritone. Nice to meet you. This is my friend Adrian Le Roy ~ he's a Vulcan. *Live long and prosper*. Over the years the instrument mostly known as guitar collected more strings ~ five and then six. In some countries they even have seven, or ten. But that's just showing off! The body changed shape too and the bouts

became bigger. Sounds like a song by Mental As Anything. And then along came the ukulele. The universe expands. The universe contracts. As a violinist friend once told me, *six strings is far too many*.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the formative years of the ukulele and before it had Spock ears, people were trying to figure out what to do with the bouncing flea; apart from swatting flies and paddling canoes. Strumming became fashionable. Goodness knows why. But it was easy to hold down a C chord (look mum just one finger) and before you know it you're the headline act of every ukulele festival in the universe. Welcome to the collective. The real innovators like Ernest Ka'ai, Roy Smeck, Cliff Edwards and George Formby used fancy strokes to wow their audiences. Some twirled and some whistled. So, *pucker up and blow*.

Before strumming, and Wagon Wheel, became synonymous with the the ukulele, other techniques were also used. Some picked. Some plucked. Many plinked. But, let's be honest, all of these techniques, even the humble strum, have a basis in guitar playing. Don't believe me? Look up baroque guitar. Time to get over ourselves, the mother of all fretted instruments is the guitar. Okay. Calm down. All of these instruments ~ banjo, mandolin, ukulele, machete, cuatro, rajão, cavaquinho etc ~ developed distinctive techniques. But they are all connected. One big happy family. Right? Erm....

Give a little whistle!

Back to Ferdinando Carulli. Can you hear the drums? His Opus 121 comprises 24 pieces for not-quite-beginner guitarists. The pieces explore different dance styles, particularly the waltz, especially the waltz, and did I mention the waltz, in a variety of keys and time signatures. The notes are either in first or second position ~ up to and including the 5th fret. Not too dusty. The picking hand is required to play arpeggio patterns, double notes and plucked chords. I do love a plucked chord. The thumb is kept busy moving across the bass strings while the fingers are used on the top three strings. As I already said, these are ideal pieces for honing basic finger picking techniques while learning which notes to hold down in the fretting hand and which to release. All while gently waltzing to the end of time.

But how to adapt, I mean assimilate, or whatever, these ideas to suit the ukulele and the needs of ukulele players? Well, that *is* the question which I will be exploring in this blog on the Waltzer from Op.121. I'll detail the changes I made along the way and explain why I made these changes. I'll look at the differences between the high G version and the guitar original. Vulcan or Klingon? Btw, if you're a low G player and you're feeling left out, don't fret, you have been left out. Aw, no you haven't. We welcome Ferengi too. You can play these pieces using the baritone tab.

Op.121 No. 1 ~ Waltzer

A waltz in 3/4 time. There are 4 x 8 bar sections. Each section is repeated. Sections A and B are in the tonic key while sections C and D are in the relative minor. At the end of the D section the indication *D.C. al Fine (da capo al fine)* means to go back to the start and play up to the word *Fine*, or finish, which is at the end of the B section. The convention is that on the *da capo* the sections are not repeated. Got it? Fine!

Harmonic Structure

Major

Section A: I - I - V7 - I - I - I - V7 - I

Section B: V7 - I - V7 - I - V7 - I - V7 - I

Relative Minor

Section C: i - V7 - i - V - i - V7 - V - i

Section D: V - i - V - i - V - i - V7 - i

As the chords demonstrate the piece follows a simple harmonic structure with a major section using I, and V7 chords and a minor section using i and V, or V7 chords. Note that in the minor section the V/V7 chords are major. More about that later.

High G Version

Change 1

The original is in the key of C major. But on a ukulele with standard tuning the notes are situated a 4th higher and the key becomes F major (with Bb in the key signature). This allows the notes to remain, basically, in the same position as on the guitar ~ that is in first position. For example: on the guitar the 1st fret of the 1st string (1,1) is F. On the high G ukulele the 1st fret of the 1st string (1,1) is Bb or, four notes higher ~ F, G, A, Bb.

In sections A and B, the I chord is F major. The V7 chord is C7. In sections C and D, which are in the relative minor, the i chord is D minor, the V chord is A major and the V7 chord is A7. Note that some chords are simply A while others are A7.

Every major key has a relative minor. This is found by counting up six notes from the tonic note. If F is our tonic then we count up six from F ~ F, G, A, B, C, D. Our relative minor is Dm.

Even if you are quite new to fingerstyle playing I'm sure you will be familiar with the chords mentioned so I'm not going to explain them here. They are easy enough to find in a

chord book or by doing a Google search. If we were to strum through the chords (remember there are 3 beats per bar) it would sound like this...

Major

Section A: F - F - C7 - F - F - F - C7 - F

Section B: C7 - F - C7 - F7 - C7 - F - C7 - F

Relative Minor

Section C: Dm - A7 - Dm - A - Dm - A7 - A - Dm/F

Section D: A - Dm - A - Dm - A - Dm - A7 - Dm

The harmonic structure (chord progression) provides the building blocks for the entire piece. Playing through the chords will give you a feel for the emotional landscape. For example: bars 1 and 2 use the happy home F major chord while bar 3 has the more intense sounding C7. *Who stole my Twirl?* Bar 4 releases the tension created by the C7 by pulling us back to the happy sounding F (*oh, I found it under a bag of crisps*) and so on. By way of contrast the minor sections have a darker, more melancholy feel. *My Twirl is gone. Hand me the whiskey bottle.* I often imagine these pieces (when I'm not thinking of chocolate) as an afternoon stroll along a riverbank. The sun is shining = F major. A cloud covers the sun = C7. The sun comes out again = F major. Drat I forgot to bring my umbrella = Dm. Well, something like that.

I especially love the flamenco flare of the move from Dm to A7. But I'm sure castanets and sangria weren't on Carulli's mind. Carulli creates a classical style by breaking the chords down into a series of running arpeggios. Or arpeggios running in quavers. Or quavers in running arpeggios. Or...shall we just get on with it? Okay. The constant quaver (1/8 note) movement is temporary interrupted by the chords at the end of each section. This is like the park bench beside the river where you sit down to eat your packet of salt and vinegar crisps while the tide of running quavers passes you by. I personally prefer Whotsits. Really cheesy.

Change 2

The original begins with a tonic note played in the bass (that's the 5th string of the guitar). This note is held for the entire bar with the other notes sounding over the top to create a over-ringing bass. As the ukulele doesn't have a 5th string, or a bass, I've moved that opening note up an octave. The F is, therefore, played on the 2nd string. As a result the next note, C or open 3rd string, is a 4th lower. This messes with the notation, not to mention my head. The F written as a dotted minim (dotted half note) is, strictly speaking, incorrect as the lower voice,

(which it is but isn't) should not be higher than the inner voice. But, it is and I've written it this way to emphasise that the F should ring on for the entire bar. Well, that was exhausting. Just hold the damned note! To me the musical reason outweighs the technical correctness of the notation. No need to beg, just differ, or doffer. Spindle or bobbin. Don't forget to dot the minim.

Change 3

This really goes hand in hand with Change 2. The altered position of the first note changes the picking hand fingering. On the guitar the first note is played by the thumb (p). That provides a good solid bass sound. On the ukulele the first note is played with the index finger (i). It may seem like a small detail but it's a really *really* important one. The thumb stroke, which moves in a downward motion, sounds naturally heavier than the upward stroke of the index finger. Moreover, the following note, an open C sounds on the ukulele, is played on the off beats. This means that the open C, played each time with the thumb, is naturally inclined to dominate. This is wrong. It's the elephant in the room that could easily become overbearing. The easiest and most obvious solution is play those thumb notes very lightly with the side of thumb so you're using the flesh rather than with the nail. I hardly ever use my thumb nail. The sound on the ukulele is too thin and nasal and it pulls the hand and wrist into an awkward position.

To summarise: the notes which fall on the main beats (1,2,3) are played either with the index finger (that is the notes on the 2nd string) or the middle finger (notes on the 1st string).

It's worth taking a moment to look at all the main beat notes in the A section in more detail because they provide the melodic interest.

Bar 1: F - C - A (remember these are just the notes that fall on beats 1, 2 & 3.)

Bar 2: F - F - A

Bar 3: E - G - Bb

Bar 4: F - A - F

Bar 5: F - C - A

Bar 6: F - F - A

Bar 7: C - Bb - G

Bar 8: Full chord (F)

What do you notice about those notes? Okay. Think of the individual chords ~ F and C or C7. Now think of the notes that make up each chord. The notes that make up the F chord are F, A, C. The notes that make up the C chord are C, E, G. And the notes for C7 are C, E, G, Bb. If you

look again at the melodic notes above you'll see that they are also part of the chords. This is why the piece sounds so consonant and pleasing.

The entire phrase of the A section is eight bars but it can be broken down into 2 x 4 bars. We see this in the harmonic structure. Bar 5 is the same as bar 1. Bar 6 is the same as bar 2. Bars 3 and 7 are based on the C7 (V7) chord but the melodic notes are altered. In bar 3 the melody ascends leaving us with a question. In bar 7 the melody descends leading us back to our tonic and answering our question. First four bars act as the question. The next four bars provide the answer. What was the question? The question is the answer.

Change 4

We need to discuss bar 3. Why is the G on beat 2 played as an open 4th string when it could be played at 3,2 (3rd fret, 2nd string) and thus maintain our picking pattern. The sudden change to open 4th seems a little sassy. Yep! Variety is the spice of life and since we are playing a ukulele and thinking like ukulele players we just have to make use of that glorious high G string.

In order for this to work fluently the middle finger (m) moves to play the open E string on beat 1. Now the index finger plays the open C and the thumb plays the open G. The Bb on beat 3 can be played with either middle (m) or ring (a) finger.

Similarly in bar 7 my picking pattern changes to m - i - m - i - p - i (see Change 5 for more about this bar). Of course, the ring finger (a) could replace middle ~ up to you. The main thing is that we hear the descending line of the melodic notes C - Bb - G. Emphasis moves from middle (or ring) finger to thumb.

Change 5

Staying with bar 7. In the guitar version the first note is a low G played on the 6th string. Of course, I decided to whack that note up two octaves to create that melodic line of C - Bb - G mentioned above. Works for me!

The B section begins at bar 9. We're still in F major and Carulli is still mucking around with I and V, or V7, chords. Note how throughout the major section (b.1 to b.16) the open C strings sounds on every off beat, thus acting as a pedal. That C belongs to both our chords. In the F chord it is the 5th, while in the C chord the note C is the tonic. Again this is a simple but effective device. It creates harmonic stability while allowing all the other notes to move around like butterflies that are inevitably drawn to the same flower.

Change 6

In bars 9 and 10 the first note of each bar sounds an octave higher despite being placed on the 4th string ~ as Carulli does. The difference is the re-entrant tuning. No need to dwell further on that. But playing this note on the 4th string does mean using the thumb so we do encounter a technical similarity in the picking hand fingering with p - i - m - i - m - i working very nicely here on both guitar and ukulele.

In bar 10 the pattern can either be the same as b.9 with the middle finger stretching to the 1st string, or the ring finger can be used instead of m. The important thing is to identify the melody and bring out these notes. If you don't do this the music will sound mechanical. Don't be a Borg drone. Be Hugh.

Change 7

Bar 15 is the same as bar 7 mentioned above. Bar 11 is similar with G on beat 3 moved to the open 4th string. By way of picking pattern I would use m - i - a - i - p - i. The main thing here is to not get your fingers in a tangle on the last 3 notes of the bar.

In bar 17 we modulate to D minor with Dm now our i chord. Little i for minor. Capital V7 for the E7 chord which is major.

Change 8

By now my penchant for playing all Gs on the open 4th string rather than at 3,2 is becoming clear. Bar 18 (which is repeated as b.22) presents an opportunity for many open strings. And I do love an open string on the ukulele! On the guitar the top three open strings don't sound so great, especially the open 1st string. This is one obvious, but often overlooked difference between the guitar and ukulele.

Guitar ~ open string bad

Ukulele ~ open string good

The basic premise of the piece is arpeggio movement and this implies the notes should over-ring as much as possible in order to create the harmonic effect. Nope! We're not talking about campanella here. We talking harmony realised as a sequence of arpeggios. Granted we do have some melodic notes thrown in (as already mentioned) but these notes still belong to the relevant chord. That high C (3,1) in bar 1 is part of the F major triad (F, A, C) and the open A on beat 3 also belongs to the F chord. Thus, we have the harmony working within itself to create melodic interest. And this is why the music sounds so simple, and so pleasing. It is what it is ~ a simple and pleasing little study. The genius of Carulli is that he is using this simple and

pleasing waltz to instruct us, if we listen carefully, in the theory behind the music. With just a little extra thought and effort we can absorb some basic theory through our practice.

Bar 1 F major

String	BEAT 1		BEAT 2		BEAT 3	
A			C		A	
E	F					
C		C		C		C
G						

Bar 2 F major

String	BEAT 1		BEAT 2		BEAT 3	
A					A	
E	F		F			
C		C		C		C
G						

Bar 3 C7

String	BEAT 1		BEAT 2		BEAT 3	
A					Bb	
E	E					
C		C		C		C
G			G			

Bar 4 F major

String	BEAT 1		BEAT 2		BEAT 3	
A			A			
E	F				F	
C		C		C		C
G						

Bar 5 F major

String	BEAT 1		BEAT 2		BEAT 3	
A			C		A	
E	F					
C		C		C		C
G						

Bar 6 F major

String	BEAT 1		BEAT 2		BEAT 3	
A					A	
E	F		F			
C		C		C		C
G						

Bar 7 C7

String	BEAT 1		BEAT 2		BEAT 3	
A	C		Bb			
E						
C		C		C		C
G					G	

Bar 8 F major

String	BEAT 1		BEAT 2		BEAT 3	
A						
E	F	~	~	~	~	~
C	C	~	~	~	~	~
G	A	~	~	~	~	~

Bar 9 C7

String	BEAT 1		BEAT 2		BEAT 3	
A						
E			G		E	
C		C		C		C
G	Bb					

Bar 10 F major

String	BEAT 1		BEAT 2		BEAT 3	
A			A			
E					F	
C		C		C		C
G	A					

Bar 11 C7

String	BEAT 1		BEAT 2		BEAT 3	
A			Bb			
E	E					
C		C		C		C
G					G	

Bar 12 F major

String	BEAT 1		BEAT 2		BEAT 3	
A			A			
E	F				F	
C		C		C		C
G						

Bar 13 C7

String	BEAT 1		BEAT 2		BEAT 3	
A						
E			G		E	
C		C		C		C
G	Bb					

Bar 14 F major

String	BEAT 1		BEAT 2		BEAT 3	
A			A			
E					F	
C		C		C		C
G	A					

Bar 15 C7

String	BEAT 1		BEAT 2		BEAT 3	
A	C		Bb			
E						
C		C		C		C
G					G	

Bar 16 F major

String	BEAT 1		BEAT 2		BEAT 3	
A						
E	F	~	~	~	~	~
C	C	~	~	~	~	~
G	A	~	~	~	~	~

Bar 17 Dm

String	BEAT 1		BEAT 2		BEAT 3	
A			A		A	
E		F		F		F
C	D					
G						

Bar 18 A7

String	BEAT 1		BEAT 2		BEAT 3	
A			A		A	
E						
C	C#					
G		G		G		G

Bar 19 Dm

String	BEAT 1		BEAT 2		BEAT 3	
A			A		A	
E		F		F		F
C	D					
G						

Bar 20 A

String	BEAT 1		BEAT 2		BEAT 3	
A			A		A	
E		E		E		E
C	C#					
G						

Bar 21 Dm

String	BEAT 1		BEAT 2		BEAT 3	
A			A		A	
E		F		F		F
C	D					
G						

Bar 22 A7

String	BEAT 1		BEAT 2		BEAT 3	
A			A		A	
E						
C	C#					
G		G		G		G

Bar 23 A7

String	BEAT 1		BEAT 2		BEAT 3	
A			A		A	
E		E		E		E
C	C#					
G						

Bar 24 Dm

String	BEAT 1		BEAT 2		BEAT 3	
A						
E						
C	D	~	~	~		
G						

Bar 25 A

String	BEAT 1		BEAT 2		BEAT 3	
A						
E			E		E	
C		C#		C#		C#
G	A					

Bar 26 Dm

String	BEAT 1		BEAT 2		BEAT 3	
A						
E			F		F	
C		D		D		D
G	A					

Bar 27 A7

String	BEAT 1		BEAT 2		BEAT 3	
A						
E			G		G	
C		E		E		E
G	A					

Bar 28 Dm / F major

String	BEAT 1		BEAT 2		BEAT 3	
A			A		A	
E		F		F		F
C						
G	A					

Bar 29 A

String	BEAT 1		BEAT 2		BEAT 3	
A						
E			E		E	
C		C#		C#		C#
G	A					

Bar 30 Dm

String	BEAT 1		BEAT 2		BEAT 3	
A						
E			F		F	
C		D		D		D
G	A					

Bar 31 A7

String	BEAT 1		BEAT 2		BEAT 3	
A						
E			G			E
C		E		E		C#
G	A				A	

Bar 32 Dm

String	BEAT 1		BEAT 2		BEAT 3	
A						
E						
C	D	~	~	~		
G						