

Frank Butler: An Interview

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Frank Butler (Fig. 1) will hardly need an introduction to concertinists: he was one of the twentieth century's finest players of the English concertina, with a career as a performer that spanned the 1920s-1940s; he was one of the most important teachers of the instrument, which he taught for several decades in London's schools for adult-education; beginning in the 1950s, he was a driving force in—and one of the founding members of—the International Concertina Association, to which he devoted himself with his usual energy; and he was even a historian of the instrument, having contributed an informative article on the behind-the-scenes business of concertina manufacturing in the nineteenth century.¹ In addition, Butler touched many concertinists with whom he never came into personal contact through his fine tutor for the instrument, *The Concertina*,² which not only offers a comprehensive method for playing the instrument, but provides a primer on the basic elements of music theory, and thus reflects Butler's strongly held belief that concertinists should be good, well-rounded musicians.

What follows is based on an interview that I conducted with Frank Butler in January 1975.³

Frank E. Butler was born in March 1904,⁴ the youngest of three children. His formal education came to an end when he was fourteen, at which time he was apprenticed to a wholesale drapers for two-and-a-half years. He then spent the remainder of his working life in the employ of a publisher that specialized in school textbooks, rising from book packer to the important post of advisor on educational publishing. Frank began his musical career as a pianist:



Fig. 1. Frank Butler and Eileen Jones in Frank's garden, 1991

My mother made efforts to teach me the piano, not very successfully because she belonged to the 'spare the rod and spoil the child' fraternity, and therefore she was quite harsh in her teaching. But when I was sixteen-and-a-half, I suddenly took to it on my own account, except that if my mother walked in to play, I walked out. I wasn't having the risk of another cuff!

Frank taught himself to play the piano and read music by using the Trinity College of Music examinations for the piano as a guide. Before long, he was touring as a pianist with a 'concert party', that is, a group of musicians who normally joined forces with a comedian, singer, and Master of Ceremonies to perform at local clubs. Most of the members of the party were employed in regular day jobs, and used their party performances in order to earn a bit of extra money on the side.

Frank's interest in the concertina was inspired by the memory of his grandfather, the well-known concertina manufacturer George Jones:⁵

My grandfather, George Jones, was a manufacturer of concertinas. I can't tell you from memory when he started in the business; I think he gave up around 1910. He started as an out-worker for Wheatstone's. He joined with another outworker of Wheatstone's [Jabez Austin] in some sort of partnership. . . My grandfather [joined Austin] at the age of twenty, as manager, which was a pretty hectic rise for those days, and [within a year, Austin] had drunk himself to death. So my grandfather found himself in possession of quite a good-sized music business. . .

Two of Jones's students would play a crucial role in Butler's career: Arthur and Joseph Webb. Better known as the 'Brothers Webb' (Arthur as Root-Toot, or Ruté, as it was sometimes spelled, Joseph as Jo-Jo), they were among the most popular musical circus clowns of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and also played the music halls and clubs that were, at the time, ubiquitous throughout England. And in addition to their fiddle, musical saw, and drum (not to mention their feats of acrobatics, juggling, and comic skits), the brothers played concertinas in the course of their act. Moreover, since the circuses of the period offered Sunday concerts of semi-classical music, the brothers had an opportunity to show off their

concertina-playing skills, Arthur on the treble, Joseph on the baritone.⁶ It was the Webb brothers who encouraged Frank to take up the concertina in the late 1920s, when Frank was twenty-five years old:

The brothers Webb said, 'What an appalling thing it is that Frank, the only one of the Jones brood that seems to have gone truly musical, doesn't play a concertina'. My grandfather, of course, was dead. My grandmother had two of his instruments, not very good ones, so the brothers Webb lent me a treble English 'tina; and, in all honesty, I can say that within six weeks I was using it on the stage; I was playing Dvořák's 'Humoresque' and Beethoven's 'Minuet in G', and they remained my stock solos for three months. . .

At that time, light-classics such as those mentioned by Frank, along with selections from operas, marches by Sousa, and popular songs of the day were the meat-and-potatoes of the concertinist's repertory. This was the music that people wanted to hear in the music halls, and this was what the professionals played.

Frank used the concertina as a 'novelty' to perform one or two solos as part of the concert party. And though Frank never became, in his words, 'a full-time, professional "artiste"', he was able to find a good deal of work, since opportunities for semi-professional performers at this time were numerous:

A lot of churches used to run regular concerts. There wasn't the radio or television...the clubs, the working-men's clubs, and so forth, were all in existence and all had regular concerts. I don't know that they have the same now; I believe they switch the television on and leave it at that. Several cinemas were not allowed to open on Sundays unless it was a 'concert'. So by some weird logic, if you put on two films and a short program of music in between, it became a 'concert'. And that was legal! With some concerts, it was lethal, I should think! That provided us with Sunday night jobs, and some of them were very well paid. This work was not limited to London, and we used to go far afield for those days: Folkestone, Cambridge, Bedford, Luton. . .it meant, very often, not getting home until 2:00 in the morning, which will tell you why I didn't want to do any more than three a week.

In the early years of the Depression, Frank's concert party broke up, and he began to tour as a solo artist. He limited his solo work to the concertina, and he soon had well over thirty numbers under his fingers. Yet Frank found performing unrewarding:

I went on to working solo turns, and my heart really wasn't in it. The people wanted popular choruses, and they wanted 'ditties' that they could sing, and I got no pleasure out of playing the concertina while eight hundred to a thousand people bawled choruses at me. . . I had some thirty numbers in my repertory then, which I knew from memory, and I knew [them] so well that I could carry on a conversation at the same time I was playing them. I always had a selection going of the popular songs of the day. Funny enough, the only ones that comes to mind immediately [are] 'If I Had A Talking Picture of You' and 'Sonny Boy', that sort of thing. I also had several selections of old music hall choruses; these would always go down well, particularly in the clubs. Truthfully, I didn't like playing them, but this was your only way to get encores. In the end, I didn't care whether I got an encore or not; that's why I gave up.

Frank put away his concertina until after the Second World War. In the meantime, his wife had encouraged him to take up the piano again, which, as it turned out, led him to playing classical music on the concertina. In 1953, the grandly named International Concertina Association—really at first just a London-based group of players—was formed. Frank attended his first meeting a year later, and became the Association's secretary in 1955, editing the *ICA Newsletter* from 1956 to 1967. Frank also organized the ICA's first festival, which subsequently developed into a yearly competition aimed at encouraging young players to take up the instrument. Finally, he began teaching group classes at various London-area 'Institutes' (schools run by the individual boroughs and devoted to adult-education), which he would continue to do through the late 1970s:

Harry Minting [the last manager of the Wheatstone firm, and a concertina player and teacher active in London for many decades] started this school [in the early 1950s]... He recruited so many students it became a little bit of a problem, and he engaged me to take his beginners' classes. He had two classes. And this really got me deep into teaching. I'd only done it in a desultory fashion up to then. I decided immediately that there was nothing published that met my requirements, [so] I wrote the exercises myself, and that, in 1955, was the beginning of the Butler tutor... Minting after a time transferred his club to the Holloway Institute, where I teach now [1975]. Minting himself became ill, and I stepped in as his substitute, his deputy, and was quite happy over it. . . And [when, in 1959,] Minting... decided to give that up entirely... [he] asked me if I would like to take the class. And I took this class over from him, really, on a few hours notice. And I'm now in my sixteenth year of it.

One year before that [thus in 1958], Battersea Institute started a class of concertina playing at the request of an old gentleman in the borough who asked the principal if he could have a class. And the principal said, 'If you can get sufficient students, yes'. The old gent advertised in all

the local papers, put little notices in the local shops, and he recruited a class. The principal of Battersea Institute engaged me as the teacher. So there I was with Battersea Institute, substituting for Minting at Holloway, and then [after Minting left] I found myself with Holloway Institute as well. And from that moment, for many years I reigned supreme as the only accredited teacher of the English concertina, with two of London's Institutes to work in.

Butler soon discovered that many of his students could not read music, so he designed a course of study that would teach the basics of reading music while it developed exercises that would help students understand the unique layout of the English concertina's keyboard. Like the Trinity method with which he had taught himself, Frank's method was based on taking the students from elementary scales and exercises to the most difficult classical music. He also drew on his experiences developing textbook material for beginning readers. Butler's method was based on constantly challenging the student with a wide variety of graded material:

To me, the most important thing in playing is sight-reading. When you're teaching an infant at school to read, you don't give him one book, and let him read that until he can read it perfectly. [Better to have him] read something different every time he opens a book. You get some repetition, but on the whole, the child's reading capacity is being expanded the whole time.

And I work very much the same [way] with music. I'm very anxious to get these pupils to the stage where they can read music as fluently as you or I read a newspaper or a novel. As in reading [a] text, you start off with a small vocabulary and gradually expand it, so with music you start off with one note and expand it until you've got twelve different pitches and four different variations of duration. And when you've acquired that much, you've already opened an enormous field to explore, because all of your simple folk or traditional tunes lay within your grasp. I aim that within two years the concertina player will be a fluent reader and have considerable dexterity in playing. A brilliant pupil will go through my course in eight months; I shouldn't think I've seen this more than about three times in fifteen years, but it's done.

Sadly, by the early 1970s, Butler's eyesight was failing, and he had to wait several years to get the operation that he needed through Britain's National Health system. Still, he continued to teach through the early 1980s. Fortunately, the concertina revival of the mid-1970s—based mainly in England—brought him to the attention of a new generation of players, and with the publication of his instruction book, his method of teaching spread widely and quickly. Although Butler was himself primarily interested in the 'classics', he was whole-heartedly sympathetic to all styles of music, and his

teaching gave students a strong foundation for playing in any style they wished.

Honored and admired by all who knew him, Frank Butler—a gentle man with a wonderful sense of humor—passed away on 21 February 1992.⁷

NOTES

1. See 'Concertinas in the Commercial Road: The Story of George Jones', *Concertina & Squeezebox*, 20 (1989), 5-14; Jones was Butler's maternal grandfather.

2. Frank Butler, *The Concertina: A Handbook and Tutor for Beginners on the English Concertina* (Duffield: The Free Reed Press, 1974/reprint: New York: Oak Publications, 1976); another of Butler's pedagogical publications was *Concertina Two* (n.p.: Frank Butler, 1983), with a supplement titled *Arranging Music for the English Concertina, with an Introduction to Harmony*; there is a review of the 1983 publication in *Concertina Magazine*, 7 (1984), 18-19; see Randall C. Merris, 'Instruction Manuals for the English, Anglo, and Duet Concertina: An Annotated Bibliography', *The Free-Reed Journal*, 4 (2002), 90 (Merris's valuable inventory of concertina tutors is also available online: <<http://www.maccann-duet.com/merris/bibliography/index.htm>>).

3. The interview was conducted as part of a research project on the concertina that I was able to carry out thanks to a Youth Grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Eventually, Butler wrote about me in a short note titled 'Richard Carlin Revisited', *Concertina & Squeezebox*, 20 (1989), 21. In addition to Frank Butler, I interviewed Harry Minting, Harry Crabb, Arthur Austin, and the sisters Inga, Tina, Sylvia, and Lillian Webb, known as the Fayre Four Sisters, who were the daughters of the concertina-playing Joseph Webb (about whom see below); I reported on my interview with the Webb sisters in 'The Fayre Four Sisters: Concertina Virtuosi', *The Free-Reed Journal*, 3 (2000), 79-88.

4. There has been some confusion about the year. Although 1904 is the year cited both by Butler himself in the interview and Alex Richards in 'The Frank Butler Story', *Concertina Magazine*, 9 (Winter 1989), 20, the obituary in *Concertina & Squeezebox*, 27 (1992), 4-5, gives the year as 1903. My thanks to Stephen Chambers for calling Richards's article to my attention and to Jon McNamara for providing me with a copy.

5. Jones (1832-1918) is usually credited with having expanded the scale of the Anglo-German concertina from its original 20-button, diatonic format to a fully chromatic, 30-, 36-, or 40-button instrument; he also manufactured English concertinas, and designed a portable harmonium that was a commercial success. Jones himself played the concertina in the music halls, and was influential as a teacher of the instrument; on Jones, see Butler, 'Concertinas in the Commercial Road'; Neil Wayne, 'Concertina Book-Final Edit', online at <<http://www.maccann-duet.com/chambers/index.html>> unpublished manuscript, 58-65 (a copy in the

Wayne Archive, Horniman Museum, London); Stephen Chambers, 'Louis Lachenal: "Engineer and Concertina Manufacturer" (Pt. 1)', *The Free-Reed Journal*, 1 (1999), 7-8; Jones's own 'Memoir' appears (heavily edited by Frank Butler and Neil Wayne) as 'The Concertina in Victorian Times: An Echo from the Past—Recollections of the English Concertina Trade by George Jones', *Free Reed: The Concertina Newsletter*, 16 (1973), 14-20.

6. Further on the Brothers Webb, see Frank Butler, 'The Webb Brothers: A Memorial', *Concertina & Squeezebox*, 18-19 (1989), 11-14; Carlin, 'The Fayre Four Sisters', 79-82.

7. There is an eloquent obituary by Joel Cowan in *Concertina & Squeezebox* (see note 3); although the *ICA Newsletter* did not run a formal obituary, No. 385 (May/June 1992), 3, contains some letters of tribute (my thanks to Wes Williams for this information).



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