

The Webb Brothers

A Memorial, by Frank Butler

The Webb Brothers were musical clowns with an international reputation, worldwide in their travels. I have not access to records of their lives, and this account is based on what they told me in their later years, which were my earlier ones.

They were born around 1855, and relentlessly trained for their profession from a very early age. The training included ballet dancing, acrobatics, fencing, and some form of music. They were placed under the tutelage of my grandfather, George Jones, for concertina playing, at which they excelled. His method was based on that of George Case, whose published tutor would alarm most aspiring concertina players of this day. I have the copy used by the Brothers Webb.

Their act was clowning in every sense, with one partner smiling and the other woebegone. They used a variety of musical instruments, mostly unorthodox, some of which were concealed under their voluminous costumes. For example, they had a

scale of tune motor horns strapped around their bodies, which would sound in response to pressure or a blow. Of course they produced miniature concertinas from their pockets. They had a set of handbells which could be fastened to hands, feet, and forehead. (Most of these accessories came my way, for around 1932 Joe Webb had a forlorn hope that I and my brother would follow in his footsteps.)

The act always concluded with a spirited march, played on treble and baritone English concertinas (made by George Jones, of course), and accompanied by the orchestra in a music hall, the band in a circus, and for their last few performances, sometimes by a cinema organ.

As an old clown, Clown Rainbow told me that in their young days the Brothers Webb would do a back-flip while playing concertinas. With all the clowning, they were basically good musicians, and quite brilliant concertina players. They made appearances as concert artistes, performing the

The Webb Bros.



Jojo and Ruté

*Bros. Webb.
Oct 5th 1928*

overtures, and Waldteufel and Gung'l waltzes which were the standard fare for the day. Arthur Webb told me their biggest problem was to remember to walk on to the platform sedately when in evening dress, and not to perpetuate their clowns running gait. Their music hall and circus playing was bravura in style, and they swung their concertinas unashamedly, but their concert performances were from score, and restrained.

They remained close friends with George Jones, and often sought his advice, visiting him frequently when in England. Arthur Webb was a trustee under George Jones' will, a duty I shared with him when passing years made it desirable to enlist another and younger man in that capacity. Arthur Webb did not marry until approaching retirement, but sadly he only had a few years of happiness before he died. It was Arthur Webb who thought it strange that I did not play the concertina (I was a pianist) and he lent, and afterwards gave me what I think was the original George Jones treble used in the act. Hearing my progress thereon, he had no difficulty in persuading his brother to give me also the baritone concertina of the pair, and later a bass instrument.

Joe Webb was the elder of the two, and he married early in his career, to a Swedish woman whom I and my brothers adored. They had four daughters, whose Scandinavian tresses justified their adopted title of the Fayre Four. They were stars of the music hall stage, and although they featured several instruments, it was their concertina playing that was superb. They played Greig's "Morning" at an I.C.A. Festival concert, from memory, of course. Their repertoire included Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsody.

When Arthur died, his brother Joe turned often to the Butler household for company, for his daughters were constantly on tour. He and I played concertinas together, mostly pieces from his collections of arrangements made by his brother for concert performance, but I did play pianoforte to his concertina renderings of some of the old fantasias from Wheatstone's catalogue. I joined him in several concert engagements, rather proud to do so, but I realized that musical fashions had changed and there was really no place for us. There were many passages where I did not match his technique, but I astonished him by my sight reading. But nearly always he said I was "too loud," which is the complaint I make in turn about the younger players of today.

A few anecdotes in conclusion. I was only eight when Arthur Webb joined me and my brothers in the twilight in my grandfather's garden. He talked to us of his travels until it was quite dark. On their voyage to South America they were out of sight of land for seventeen days. They practised in their cabin and often had to play to fellow passengers. They kept lesser quality concertinas for use on the voyage, lest the sea air rusted the reeds of their best Jones instruments. In a then remote town in the wild west of the U.S.A. the gas light in their hotel bedroom bore the legend "To blow this lamp out is death" -- a salutary warning to visitors from further west who knew no illumination other than oil lamp or candle.

In 1912 they were in Australia. Unable to join the Golden Wedding celebrations of Mr. and Mrs. Jones, they brought them back from that country an emu's egg, engraved with a scene which included an emu and a kangaroo. It was mounted on an ornated silver stand representing fern leaves.

There were also two egg cups, one with a kangaroo as a supporter, the other an emu. All were solid silver, with gold filigree work. The handsome set were confined to a glass dome in the Victorian tradition and had pride of place in my grandfather's drawing room. An engraved silver plate announced the celebration, and a second plate supplied by George Jones in typical doggerel verse described inaccurately the activities of the wild life in the presence of

Rute-tute and Jo-Jo Webb. Are such souvenirs still made? It took a great-grand-daughter to notice more than fifty years later, that it was all actually made in Birmingham, England.

I always remember the Webb Brothers as two gentlemen of great courtesy and polished manners, welcome guests everywhere, but still finding time to give help and encouragement to young aspiring musicians like me.

Notes On "Little Nell," A Webb Brothers Favorite

Composed by George Linley, Words by Charlotte Young

*They told him gently she was dead,
And spoke of Heaven and smiled,
And drew him from the lonely room
Where lay the lovely child.
'Twas all in vain he heeded not
Their pitying looks of sorrow.
"Hush, hush," he said, "she only sleeps,
She'll wake again tomorrow."
"Hush, hush," he said, "she only sleeps,
She'll wake again tomorrow."*

This song was written about 1850, its very sentimentality being in true Victorian tradition. It depicts a scene from Charles Dickens' novel, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, very nearly in Dickens' harrowing words. The arrangement of the music by Shackelton, however, gives it an organ-like quality, the progressive chords enhanced by the facility with which the concertina can build up very slow crescendoes and abruptly change to the other extreme of pianissimo. Arthur Webb, who used to give a heart-breaking rendition, told me it was arranged by Shackelton when musical director of the Bedford Music Hall, Camden Town, in consequence of his admiration for the concertina playing of the Brothers Webb.

The copy which Arthur Webb gave to me is, however, dated Felixstowe, 1908. He gave it to me twenty years later; it is now tattered and discolored.

LITTLE NELL

Arranged for English concertina
by Shackelton.

Andante

The musical score is written on six staves in G major (one sharp) and 2/4 time. The tempo is marked *Andante*. The piece begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The first staff shows the initial melody and accompaniment. The second staff continues the piece, with a *p* dynamic. The third staff features a *mf* dynamic. The fourth staff includes a *cresc* (crescendo) marking. The fifth staff shows a *mf* dynamic, followed by a *p* dynamic and a *dim.* (diminuendo) marking. The sixth staff concludes the piece with a *pp* (pianissimo) dynamic. The score includes various musical notations such as treble clefs, a key signature of one sharp, and dynamic markings.