
The Fayre Four Sisters

Concertina Virtuosi

Richard Carlin

During the 1920s and '30s, the concertina virtuosi known as the Fayre Four Sisters—Inga, Tina, Sylvia, and Lillian Webb¹—were among the most popular performers on the British music hall and vaudeville circuits. They represented the end of the line for the “class” act that combined female good looks, fancy choreography and sets, and a repertory of light classical music (some of which had been popular since the early nineteenth century), along with more recent pop hits (see Fig. 1).

The sisters were the daughters of Joseph Webb, one-half of the popular musical-clown act of Root Toot (also called Ruté) and JoJo (Root Toot was Joseph's brother, Robert) that was active from the 1880s to the 1920s (see Fig. 2).² As did many other musical clowns, the brothers incorporated a number of instruments with comic potential into their act. And with its floppy bellows and easily wrought squeaks and squawks, the concertina had broad appeal to the circus performers. The Webb brothers even had a “giant concertina” built which consisted of a large shell that surrounded a real, playable instrument. It was not long before they were imitated both in England and on the Continent. Even novelty acts on the vaudeville and music hall circuits were soon smitten by the instrument, and we thus have tales of concertinists accompanying magicians and even singing parrots.

¹When, at the age of eighteen in January 1975, I interviewed the Webb sisters and other concertina “celebrities” (Frank Butler, Harry Minting, Harry Crabb, Arthur Austin, *et al.*), I was, perhaps, overly respectful—and even somewhat in awe—of those who were kind enough to open up their memories to this newcomer to concertina circles. I thus decided not to press the Webb sisters on what I thought might be a somewhat delicate matter: their dates of birth. Suffice it to say that all the sisters were then in their seventies and eighties, and that all have since passed away. It was, in retrospect, a mistake, since all subsequent attempts to pin down their precise dates of birth—and even death—have proved unsuccessful.

²On the Webbs, see Frank Butler, “The Webb Brothers: A Memorial,” *Concertina & Squeeze-box* 18-19 (1989): 11-14.

a.



b.



Fig. 1a-b. Two photographs of the Fayre Four Sisters as they appeared in the 1920s(?); the concertinas had a dull, gold finish, courtesy of Wheatstone & company

(photograph in author's collection).

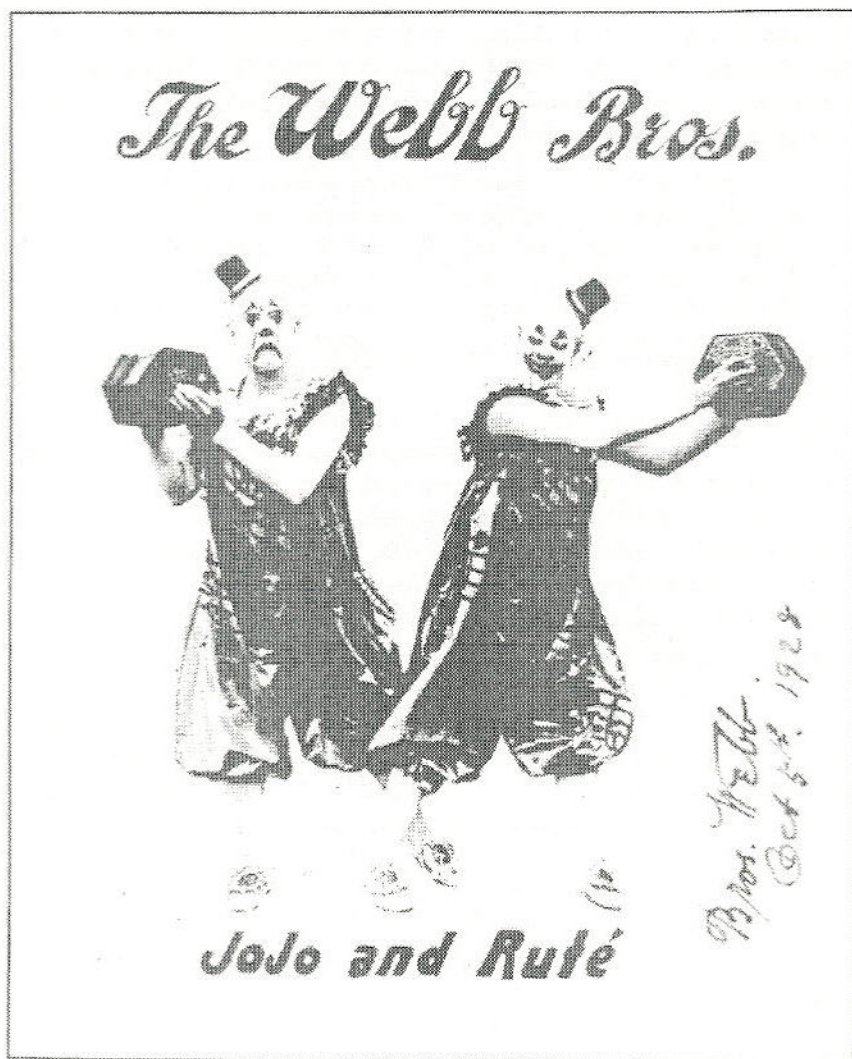


Fig. 2. The Webb Brothers, in a photograph signed on 5 October 1928 (photograph in author's collection).

Like many other circus comedy acts, the brothers often broke the flow of hijinks by performing pieces from the light-classical repertory: Sullivan's *The Lost Chord* (a special favorite), popular arias and overtures, and other pieces that would have been well known to audiences of the day. Sylvia Webb recalled how the brothers would transport the audience from moments of broad comedy to musical virtuosity:³

And from those clowns having done this funny invisible music, poking each other and sitting on the back of a chair and everything, suddenly the lights went down, and then all you'd see were these two clown faces. And they'd play this lovely organ music, *The Sicilian Hymn*, and then dad went into *The Bells*. And of course, after that, everybody learnt to play it. But I learnt to play *The Bells* standing behind my father. He always went into a different world when he played *The Bells*. And I had to stand behind him and follow his . . . swinging movement so as to get the real thing . . .

The Bells to which Sylvia refers is the *Imitation of Church Bells*, in which the concertina player, swinging the instrument back and forth, would play the familiar sequence of the Westminster chimes. In fact, *Imitation of Church Bells*, as arranged by Henri Albano, an active music hall concertinist from the turn of the century, enjoyed great success with concertina players of the day.⁴ And when I recorded dozens of concertinists in London in 1975, they were still playing the same Westminster chime progression and vigorously swinging their instruments to and fro.⁵

Although the Webb sisters were not raised to be professional musicians, their parents, in typical turn-of-the-century fashion, insisted that they study piano. The two eldest sisters, Inga and Tina, were the most talented, and Tina eventually became both the leader of the quartet and its chief arranger. It was a

³All quotations attributed to the Webb sisters were obtained during the interviews conducted in London in 1975 (see note 1).

⁴About Albano little is known except that he was active around the turn of the century. His arrangement of *Imitation of Church Bells* appears in its entirety as Music Supplement No. 2, pp. 107-109.

⁵One elderly player, Arthur H. Austin, took great pride in his own variation on the piece, which he called *Imitation of Rusty Church Bells*. Though he played the same Westminster sequence, the rhythm was somewhat askew. He said that although almost everyone played *Imitation of Church Bells*, only he could imitate *rusty* ones! Perhaps Mr. Austin is a descendent of the Jabez Austin (d. 1857) who made reed pans for the Wheatstone company, though his failure to mention such a concertina "pedigree" may speak against such a relationship; on Jabez Austin, see Stephen Chambers, "Louis Lachenal: 'Engineer and Concertina Manufacturer', Pt. I," *The Free-Reed Journal* 1 (1999), 7; and Neil Wayne, "Concertina Book: Final Edit" (unpublished manuscript), 71.

relative of the family, George Jones, himself a noted concertina manufacturer,⁶ who gave the sisters their first lessons on the concertina. Inga recalls that her father and uncle had gone on tour, and that Jones decided to teach the two eldest sisters and their mother how to play the concertina as a welcome-home surprise:

Mr. Jones started us a surprise when our dad and uncle had gone to South America for six months. And he said "We'll learn you the concertina," because we'd only studied piano up to that [time]. He taught mother to play the bass [concertina] at that time because Lillian and Sylvia were too young to play. . . . And dad was so delighted, he said, "We'll get you a really good teacher."

The "really good teacher" turned out to be "Madame" Marie Rowbotham, a well-known concertinist and a member of the Chidley family, which was itself related to Charles Wheatstone and played a prominent role in the manufacture and promotion of concertinas.⁷ And though Rowbotham was not really a music hall performer—she played classical music exclusively and appeared mainly on the recital stage—she had, by the turn of the century, gained a following with music hall performers and was not at all out of her element teaching the daughters of a musical clown.

The four girls began to perform together when Inga and Tina reached their teens. At first they played only classical music—no doubt a reflection of Madame Rowbotham's lessons—but they soon expanded their repertory to include the popular music of the day. The sisters enjoyed their greatest success from the mid-'20s through the early '30s, when they played throughout England and Europe, and even made a trip to the United States, where they appeared at New York's Palace Theater and, during the late 1920s, played the Keith Orpheum vaudeville circuit. Their programs covered a wide repertory,

⁶On Jones (1832-1919), whose "Recollections of the English Concertina from 1844 by George Jones, born February 29th, 1832," is a major source for information on the concertina trade in the nineteenth century, see Chambers, "Louis Lachenal," 7-8; Wayne, "Concertina Book: Final Edit," 58-65. Jones's memoir appears—heavily edited and with commentary by Frank E. Butler and Neil Wayne—as "The Concertina Trade in Victorian Times: An Echo from the Past—Recollections of the English Concertina Trade by George Jones," *Free-Reed: The Concertina Newsletter* 16 (November 1973), 14-20; see also, Butler (and Joel Cowan), "Concertinas in the Commercial Road: The Story of George Jones," *Concertina & Squeezebox* 20 (Summer 1989): 5-14.

⁷On the Chidley family, see Chambers, "Louis Lachenal," 25; Wayne, "Concertina Book: Final Edit," 65-67; Allan W. Atlas, *The Wheatstone English Concertina in Victorian England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 4, 6, 35, 39-40.

ranging from transcriptions of Chopin piano preludes to arrangements of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* and Jelly Roll Morton's enormously popular *Tiger Rag*⁸.

Thanks to their close connections with the firm of Wheatstone, the Fayre Four Sisters had easy access to the entire "consort" of English concertinas: thus Tina and Sylvia played trebles, Inga the baritone, and Lillian the bass, with all the instruments coming from among Wheatstone's top-of-the-line Aeolas, octagonal-shaped instruments with black leather bellows and black, ebonized wooden ends. But when an early promoter decided that black concertinas were "too funereal-looking" for a female quartet, the girls went to Wheatstone, which provided them with custom-made, gold-laminated instruments (including gold leather bellows). And if, according to the sisters, Wheatstone was initially reluctant to "gussy up" its instruments, the firm recognized their need for a touch of flamboyant showmanship. Indeed, in their heyday, the Fayre Four's flashy-looking concertinas were matched both by their numerous and lavish costumes and by the elaborate sets that they used as backdrops for their act.

As musical director of the group, Tina turned out arrangements that were both difficult and inventive. Even old warhorses such as *The Lost Chord* were arranged to take advantage of the quartet's rich tone color and wide range, while the choirboy costumes and the painted backdrop of a large church organ completed the illusion and helped make this their big number. At times the novelty became downright acrobatic, as when the four girls waltzed—concertinas in hand—while playing *The Blue Danube*; here each sister held one end of one instrument in one hand and one end of another in the other hand, playing as they danced (see Fig. 3). They recalled the feat as follows:

Inga: My sister started by singing it, and we played it first, then she sang a phrase, and danced a phrase, and then the four of us just joined up together, and did a waltz. . .we certainly danced with the instruments.

Sylvia: You've got two instruments that side, and the other girl has got the opposite ends of the two instruments. Now it took us quite a while to be near enough to go over without hurting the instruments. You see, we didn't want to ruin our instruments. . .

Lillian: I was terrified that they were going to tear apart.

⁸At least Jelly Roll Morton claimed to have composed it; it was, however, the Original Dixieland Jazz Band that first recorded it in 1917, and it is their cornetist, Nick La Rocca, whose name appears on the copyright.



Fig. 3. The Fayre Four Sisters waltzing to *The Blue Danube* as they performed it (photograph in author's collection).

For *The Volga Boat Men*, they performed the same trick, this time imitating the rowing of a boat. As Sylvia put it:

We always like working cute ideas because. . . they add a little excitement to [the act]. When we did *The Volga Boat Song* [sic], [we] slung the concertinas over our heads, it took *hours* to rehearse it. You were playing on one instrument with the left hand and on another with the right hand. And we made it look like the rowing of the boats. . . always got a round of applause.

One of their most popular numbers was *A Trip Around the British Isles*, which featured different hats for the different national melodies of Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. Sylvia said: "We only had hats on [plus musically unrelated costumes from shoulders down!], but it just gave the suggestion. Much better to suggest things than to do the whole thing. . ." They had hunting hats for *The Hunter's Reel*, while Lillian wore an Irish tam and a little green cape for the Irish selection; the medley ended with all four sisters playing imitations of the Scottish bagpipes.

Frank Butler, the grandson of George Jones, was a close friend of the Webb family. He described the sisters' act to me:

A quite typical turn [vaudeville act] would have to do 15-20 minutes, three or four times a day. [The Fayre Four] would have a drawing-room setting. They would all four play the piano at some time in the act, all four on one piano. The eldest one [Tina] was a very good pianist; she'd play something like Chopin's Minute Waltz as a solo, this being, even then, the popular thing. Or there was a Chopin polonaise she was very keen on playing. They would play four concertinas. They would do Rimsky-Korsakov's Flight of the Bumble Bee [from the opera *The Tale of Tsar Saltan*], Grieg's "Morning [Mood]" [from the *Peer Gynt Suite*, No. 1]; that was another great one of theirs. . . . They also played other instruments. One time they played one-string fiddles; another time they played saxophones. . . . They would give virtually a drawing-room performance of four very nice young ladies. They were nicknamed "the most lady-like young ladies on the English stage." They were four rather lovely blond girls; their mother was Swedish, and their Swedish influence came out in their blondness and their general cast of features. Very, very, charming girls.⁹

Although the sisters played classical music exclusively when they first began to perform, they came to realize that they had to broaden their act to interest the audience. Sylvia recalled: "First of all, we were terribly classical; we were snooty, yes. We were going to educate the people, and the people educated us!" They began to add what they called "rhythm numbers" to their act, jazz and pop songs of the day. And when, in the 1930s, the accordion became popular and audiences began requesting that they play that better-known instrument, the girls quickly came up with an idea: they would open the show playing four accordions, and then replace them—one by one—with concertinas. This, according to Tina, was to show what a superior and "beautiful tone" the concertina had.

In the early '30s, the Fayre Four Sisters led a road show through England that featured a mix of musical artists, comedians, and dancing girls. The show's finale was an elaborately staged number, and featured the four sisters playing *Have You Heard the Concertina Band?* As Inga and Sylvia described it:

Inga: The whole thing opened up in black and white, with the scenery painted like music, and all the girls were in black and white costumes with music, notes, and theme. And Wheatstones made these instruments that only played four chords. And the girls learnt, you see. . .

⁹Interview of January, 1975.

Sylvia: They numbered the chords 1, 2, 3, 4, and they had it [the numbers] on a glove. . . instead of written-out music, they had: 1, 3, 2, 4, 4, 4, 1, 3. And those studs [the buttons on the instrument] were numbered like that, and mind you they all played. . .

Inga: Each stud played a chord. They only had four studs, and each played a chord. . . And we played the melody in the front. . .

The great expense of manufacturing the sixteen custom-made instruments caused the sisters to keep this act on the road for two years.

The Fayre Four made only a few recordings.¹⁰ In 1933, a Scottish fan formed the “Great Scott” label and released two 78 recordings.¹¹ The sister’s own *Russian Fantasy*, a medley of well-known Russian melodies, featured their performance of *The Volga Boat Men*, with Tina playing rapid upper-octave runs on the piccolo concertina.¹² The medley also included the familiar theme of Tchaikovsky’s *1812 Overture*, and ended with—of all things—the ever-popular *Imitation of Church Bells*. Another impressive piece recorded around this time was Tina’s arrangement of *Raggin’ the Scale*, a novelty rag hit of the era.¹³ Tina captured the light syncopation of the piece, and her lightning fast playing of the scale passages is a highlight of the recording.

The sisters recorded one more 78 in the early 1950s, this time as a promotion for the Wheatstone company. They finally put to record their impressive version of *Flight of the Bumble Bee*, in which Tina displays her dazzling virtuosity. Indeed, Sylvia admitted that the other sisters had trouble keeping up with her: “[She] didn’t play it smeary, just slither over the notes; [she] really played the notes. Oh, but it was hells-bells for everybody to keep up with it. . .” This led into Leroy Anderson’s 1954 hit *Forgotten Dreams*, which Tina treats to a lush arrangement that is reminiscent of accordion styles of the day. Moreover, it shows that the sisters were quite up-to-date in terms of their repertory.

Although the music halls pretty much dried up after World War II, the sisters continued to work sporadically on radio and television. And when a group of concertinists founded the International Concertina Association in London in the early 1950s, the Webb sisters were invited to perform at its first festival, and served as judges for the competitions. And it was as participants at other such local events that the Fayre Four Sisters brought their career to a quiet close.

¹⁰All of these can be heard on *The English Concertina*, produced by Richard Carlin, The Smithsonian Institution, Folkways Cassette Series 08845 (1976; reissued 1992).

¹¹The label was owned by the eccentric Lord John Drummond, who recorded the sisters in the great hall of his home, Megglach Castle.

¹²The piccolo concertina is pitched an octave higher than the standard treble, and reaches up to *c*^{''''}.

¹³Composed by Edward B. Claypoole in 1915.

As noted above, it was in January 1975 that I traveled to London with the express purpose of recording a number of the legendary, but aging concertinists. Thanks to a kind introduction by Frank Butler, I was able to meet the Fayre Four Sisters, who were living together in a small row house in South London. I spent a day with them, interviewing them about the heyday of their music hall careers. Still spunky, the sisters—then in their late seventies and early eighties (see note 1)—played their arrangement of *The Lost Chord* from memory, just as they had at the beginning of so many of their performances. And though Lillian admitted that she had trouble keeping up on the bass part, it was remarkable to hear this music spring to life much as it had decades earlier.