

SERGE JAROFF'S DON COSSACK CHOIR: A TREASURE FROM THE RUSSIAN DIASPORA

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Serge Jaroff's Don Cossack Choir was a unique phenomenon in the history of twentieth-century choral music. Its original members were Cossack refugees from Russia's Don River region. Expelled from their country in 1920 after losing the Russian Civil War to the Bolsheviks, they were transported to a bleak concentration camp in Turkey. Serge Jaroff (1896–1985), a detainee with a choir school education, founded a choir there and transformed it into a world-class *a cappella* ensemble, which, once freed, established a professional career and went on to achieve widespread and long-lasting international renown.

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Photo featured on the cover of the 1968 album, *An Den Ufern Des Don (On the Banks of the Don)*.

The Don Cossacks were popular in the United States for many years, and from 1943 on were American citizens. Although they are still revered in Western Europe, especially in Germany, in the United States they largely faded from public awareness after Jaroff's death in October 1985 at the age of eighty-nine.

Interest in Russian choirs has grown considerably since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. This has brought renewed attention to the Don Cossacks in Europe, but as yet they have received little attention in America. Thanks to recent efforts in Germany and the Netherlands, reissues of their recorded and filmed legacy have become readily accessible on the Internet. The following narrative explores the choir's history, the nature of its music, and Jaroff's life.

Founding the Choir

The Cossacks were a cultural group known and feared for their military prowess who had served the Tsar for centuries. They joined the White Army, which opposed the Red Army of the Bolsheviks in the Russian Civil War, and surprisingly, were decisively defeated in Crimea. They were forced into exile in late 1920, and thousands were transported to a concentration camp in the village of Çilingir near Istanbul, Turkey.¹

Against all odds, it was there that the Don Cossack Choir was born. When a cholera epidemic broke out in the camp and despair deepened, the commanding officer ordered that a choir be formed to raise morale by singing for Russian Orthodox services. Serge Jaroff, a graduate of Moscow's famous Synodal School of Church Singing, was the only professional musician there and thus was ordered to conduct it.²

Jaroff assembled thirty-six of the best singers from the Cossack regimental choirs. He provided repertoire for them from memory because no scores were available, held rigorous rehearsals, and in a matter of months polished them to a high level of artistry.³ Eventually liberated in Bulgaria, the men stayed together and became the resident (although unpaid) choir at the Russian embassy's small church in Sofia, where their beautiful singing attracted large crowds.

Influential supporters encouraged the impoverished men to undertake a professional career in western Eu-

rope.⁴ These supporters set them up as a resident choir at a factory in France and provided financial support for their travel.⁵ On their way, however, they ran out of money in Vienna. They abandoned the plans for France and held a concert at Vienna's elegant Hofburg Palace on July 4, 1923.⁶ A large audience attended, mainly out of curiosity. Dressed in their ragged uniforms, the men opened with Rachmaninov's "Тебе поем" [Тебе poem], known in English as "We Sing to Thee." Initially there was silence, but soon the audience erupted into thunderous applause and enthusiastic cheers.⁷ Offers poured in from many other cities and countries, and they began touring widely in the non-Soviet world with spectacular success. New recruits, mostly from the émigré community, enabled them to continue touring for nearly sixty years. They eventually gave over ten thousand concerts. Countless newspaper reviews from the United States and Europe document their brilliant career.⁸

Serge Jaroff: Background

Unknown to the choir's fans, Jaroff was not born a Cossack. He was born March 20, 1896, to an ordinary merchant family in the small town of Makariev, a few hundred miles from Moscow, which is nowhere near the Don River. His father planned to send him to a business school, but at age ten the musically gifted boy won a scholarship to study at the Synodal School of Church Singing in Moscow, the main center of teaching for Russian Orthodox Church Music at that time.⁹ As a member of its famous choir, Jaroff participated in many performances in Russia and abroad.¹⁰ He was undoubtedly given an excellent music and general education there, but reports indicate that he had been a poor student.¹¹

After graduation in 1917, he attended a Moscow military school just as the Russian Revolution was underway. Eventually he joined a Cossack unit in the civil war even though he looked nothing like the typical formidable Cossack warrior. He had a youthful appearance, was thin, and was of very short stature, being only 4 feet 10.5 inches tall. Nevertheless, he was commissioned a lieutenant and served valiantly in a Cossack machine gun corps.¹²



Photo 1. Screenshot from the 1956 German movie *Das Don Kosaken Lied* showing the choir in concert.

Once he became a famous conductor, his strict control of his Cossack giants fascinated concertgoers. The choristers always dressed in austere Cossack uniforms like the ones they had worn in battle, and they always took the stage in strict military formation. Master showmen, they made this setup very popular (Photo 1).

The Choir's Repertoire and Technique

In their concerts and recordings, the Don Cossacks always sang in Russian. Their repertoire would have been familiar in Russia, but to their international audience, it was something new. The initial concert format worked so well that it never changed.¹⁴ First came Russian liturgical music that Jaroff adapted for classical performance by making it far more emotionally expressive than would have been considered appropriate for church services. Some devout Orthodox worshippers found fault with him for presenting their sacred music in such a manner, but in concert it was effective as clas-

sical music.¹⁵ A beloved example is Grigory Lvovsky's "Господи, помилуй" [Gospodi pomilui], "Lord Have mercy."¹⁶

Next came Russian folk and traditional music, which Jaroff arranged in the style of art songs. Their lyrical beauty was moving, and over the years several became popular in concert and on records. "однозвучно гремит колокольчик" [Odnovzuchno gremit kolokolchik], known in English as "Monotonously Rings the Little Bell," is one of the best loved.¹⁷

Last on the program were Cossack military songs. Some were serious and others light-hearted, but all were highly energetic and sometimes included wild Cossack dances.¹⁸ They provided a rousing finale to their performances, and audiences demanded encores.¹⁹ It is remarkable in the annals of reception history that such unusual musical programs captivated large audiences of professional musicians, music critics, and ordinary citizens worldwide for over half a century.

The Don Cossacks' profound expressiveness and technical brilliance combined to render barriers of language

and unfamiliar repertoire irrelevant. Constant dramatic variations in tempi and dynamics were an especially moving hallmark of their style. Their attacks, cutoffs, intonation, diction, and blend were so precise that many reviewers described their technique as perfect.²⁰ Distinguished music critic Deems Taylor stated that they were the best chorus he ever heard or ever hoped to hear.²¹ The famous German orchestral conductor Herbert von Karajan was once asked if there were any choirs that particularly impressed him. He said there was one: Jaroff's Don Cossacks. He attended all their concerts to try to figure out how Jaroff obtained his powerful, precise attacks but never succeeded.²²

The Move to America

The choir was based in Berlin and toured mostly in Europe in the 1920s, but in 1930, they began touring in the United States. Despite Jaroff's apprehensions, they were immediately a great success in various regions of the country and were eagerly invited back every year.²³ As newspaper reviews document, they performed in diverse venues, ranging from Carnegie Hall and the Metropolitan Opera House to school auditoriums in small cities.

Most of the choristers had fought in two wars: World War I and the Russian Civil War. Dismayed by the military buildup they witnessed in Europe in the early 1930s, which suggested that more war was imminent,²⁴ Jaroff made the dramatic decision to move the choir members to New York and to seek American citizenship.²⁵ With help from Bronson M. Cutting (1888-1935), a United States senator from New Mexico who was an ardent fan,²⁶ they gained permanent-resident status in 1936 and citizenship in 1943 and were based in New York from then on.²⁷ Members of the American choral community had ample opportunity to experience their artistry, and it was reported that they learned much from the Don Cossacks.²⁸

Jaroff as Conductor

Serge Jaroff's conducting style was unusually restrained. The singers, who numbered twenty-two after World War II, stood in two parallel lines or arcs in con-

cert and watched him intently. He used subtle hand motions and poignant facial expressions to evoke the effects he wanted.²⁹ Rachmaninov, who was a strong supporter of the choir and had mentored Jaroff early on, had advised him to conduct this way.³⁰ Fortunately, there are numerous film clips from earlier and later in his life that show him doing so (Photo 2 on the next page).

Commentators constantly marveled at his physical restraint. Far more importantly, however, Jaroff interpreted every work the choir performed in extraordinarily minute detail, which resulted in the constant expressive nuances that moved audiences so deeply.

Arrangements

Jaroff arranged most of the choir's music, and his innovations in voicings and timbre set his arrangements apart. He included falsettists³¹ to sing treble parts. This made mixed-choir repertoire from the Russian Orthodox canon possible. He stated in a rare interview that he divided the choir into falsettist, first tenor, second tenor, baritone, bass, and octavist sections, often with further divisions.³² The octavist range for which Russian choirs are famous is an octave below the normal bass range. His frequent octavist doubling of bass lines and placement of lyrical melodies in the falsettist register focused attention on his superb octavist and falsettist sections and gave the choir a signature sonority that was aesthetically very compelling.³³

Homophonic texture and basic tonal harmony typify the liturgical and secular works in the choir's repertoire. This reflects the fact that Western-influenced classical music in Russia has a relatively short history. Ukrainian-born composer Dmitry Bortniansky (1751-1825), who is best remembered for his choral works, is generally recognized as Russia's first great master of that westernized style, which he learned from study in Italy.³⁴ The choir's repertoire encompassed his works through those of nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century masters.

A notable example of the latter is Alexander Kastalsky (1856-1926), who was director of the Synodal School from 1910 to 1918 when Jaroff studied there. He championed the "New Direction" movement in Russian sacred choral music, which sought to create an au-

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thentic national style by incorporating ancient chant.³⁵ The Communist takeover sadly brought that initiative to an end.

In liturgical and secular works, Jaroff's arrangements often showcased the full choir in close harmony. In performance, the blend of the sections was impeccable. Jaroff's sound ideal was to emulate the effect of a string ensemble.³⁶ The traditions of the Synodal Choir in which he sang as a boy may have given him the idea, for the sound of the Synodal choir was said to approach that of a string quartet or choral orchestra.³⁷

Jaroff often exploited the sonority of humming, having all of his choristers hum, or having some hum while the others sang words.³⁸ This became a trademark of their style. The best-known examples are his arrange-

ments of Bortniansky's "Коль рабен наш Господь в Сионе" [Kol' slaven nash Gospod' v Sione], known in English as "How Glorious Is Our Lord in Zion."³⁹

Solo and small-ensemble passages adorned many of Jaroff's arrangements, and in the choir's secular music, choral accompaniments emulating sounds such as guitars playing, horses' hooves clattering, or soldiers marching also became a trademark of their style. Their performance of Lev Knipper's "Полюшка Поле" [Polyushka pole], "Meadowland," also called "Song of the Plains," exemplifies this.⁴⁰

Jaroff's military songs could be strident and forceful, but military songs were also where he introduced humor into his arrangements. The subjects of such songs range from celebrations of Cossack victories to



Photo 2. Screenshot from the 1956 German movie Das Don Kosaken Lied showing Jaroff conducting in concert.

adventures in the lives of ordinary soldiers. The music is often punctuated with sounds of loud whistling, raucous laughter, and exuberant yells. The “Song of Ataman [General] Platoff” exemplifies the celebration of a great victory against Napoleon.⁴¹

Accessing the Arrangements

Unfortunately, hardly any scores of Jaroff’s arrangements are available for perusal or performance, and the situation regarding them is complex. There is an official successor choir in Germany called the “Don Kosaken Chor Serge Jaroff,” led by Wanja Hlibka, who was the youngest of Jaroff’s choristers during the last years of his career. Hlibka now has custody of hundreds of Jaroff’s manuscripts, and since he uses them in concert, would have a proprietary interest in them.⁴²

Only two sets of Jaroff’s arrangements appear to have ever been published (listed below), and these scores are rare. According to the WorldCat database, which shows library holdings worldwide, only about fifteen libraries own copies. This author works in one of these research libraries.



Photo 3. Song of Ataman Platoff manuscript from www.russian-records.com.

Cossack Choir conducted by Serge Jaroff], ed. Issay Dobrowen. Berlin: Don Cossacks [sic] Choir, 1927.

1. *Album of Russian folk songs, from the repertoire of Don Cossack chorus under the direction of Serge Jaroff*, ed. Constantin Shvedoff. New York: C. & C. Music Printing Corp., 1938.

2. *Популярныя русскія народныя песни изъ репертуара Донского Казачьяго Хора регент Сергей Жаровъ*, [Popular Russian folk songs from the repertoire of the Don

It is revealing to compare the arrangements to extant recordings. In print, the arrangements look far simpler than Jaroff’s complex performance practices suggest, with few dynamic or tempo markings. A few images of his manuscripts are online and make it possible to listen with scores (Photo 3).⁴³

Such sparse written detail makes it clear that the nuances of his interpretations, which were impossible to

notate, were the key factors in turning the works into the masterpieces that enthralled their fans. It was key to the choir's long-term success that Jaroff made many new arrangements of favorite pieces and interpreted pieces differently every time they performed them.⁴⁴ Thus, he retained interest both for the choristers and their loyal audiences.

Audio and Video Legacy

Fortunately, the availability of audio recordings and videos is much different than that for scores. The Don Cossacks began making 78 rpm records in 1925, and later made many LP and 45 rpm records. There is a lengthy discography detailing them on russian-records.com, with some audio available.⁴⁵


Recently most of their records have been reissued on CDs and are available on streaming audio databases, especially Spotify and Naxos Music Library. Irina Minsky, widow of distinguished choir member Michael Minsky, has made extraordinary efforts to bring this about.

Many fans have uploaded audio files and video clips on YouTube. The Don Cossacks starred in three German feature films, *Das Don Kosaken Lied* in 1956, *Alle Tage ist kein Sonntag* in 1959, and *Mein bester Freund* in 1971; as of this writing, they are on YouTube in entirety. The choir also appeared in several German specials for German public TV in the 1960s. In these TV programs the choir moved around and deviated from the strict parallel line or parallel arc formations they always used in concert. Some full episodes and many excerpts are on YouTube.⁴⁶

Epilogue

Apart from how they are regarded in Germany, it is surprising that, as popular as they once were in the United States, the Don Cossacks would be so largely forgotten. Although he dreamed of being able to return to Russia with his choir, Jaroff was never able to do so. A resident of New Jersey, he died there in 1985 before the fall of the Soviet Union.⁴⁷

A person who was closely associated with the choir for years stated that only those who have been to a con-

cert are able to fully grasp the uniqueness of this choir, and that their recordings could only capture the sound of the choir inadequately.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, although listening to recordings or watching videos would not replicate the experience of hearing the Don Cossacks live, their recorded and filmed legacy is a remarkable repository of the choral art. For choral practitioners, access to these resources offers insight into Jaroff's methods, the nature of his choir, and the qualities that made it great. For all lovers of classical choral music who have not yet experienced them, their music is a rich treasure waiting to be discovered. 

NOTES

- ¹ Paul Robinson, *The White Russian Army in Exile, 1920–1941* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 35.
- ² Irina Minsky, *Vierzig Don Kosaken erobern die Welt; Don Kosaken Chor Serge Jaroff 1921–2015* (Groningen: Nederland Rusland Centrum, 2015), 28–29.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 30–31.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 33–34.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.
- ⁶ “Cossack Choir Wins Austrian Triumph,” *Tampa Tribune*, July 29, 1923, 1.
- ⁷ Irina Minsky, *Vierzig Don Kosaken*, 37.
- ⁸ *Ibid.* Since their initial success, many imitators have arisen, some being active to this day. Thus, Jaroff's choir is often referred to as the Original Don Cossack Choir. Knowing this helps to identify their recordings now. Some of the imitators were good. Others, however, were very poor, and their claims of nonexistent connection with Jaroff unjustly damaged his reputation. This was the reason the successor choir was founded.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*; Svetlana Zvereva, *Alexander Kastalsky: His Life and Music*, trans. Stewart Campbell (Ashgate, 2003), 127.
- ¹⁰ Sergei Bertensson and Jay Leyda, *Sergei Rachmaninoff, A Lifetime in Music* (Indiana University Press, 2001), 17, tell that his boy soprano solo greatly impressed Rachmaninov at the first public hearing of his Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom.
- ¹¹ Irina Minsky, *Vierzig Don Kosaken*, 18.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 21.
- ¹³ “Music; Cossacks Back,” *Time Magazine* v. 16:20, November

- 2, 1931, 40.
- ¹⁴ Katharina Kucher, "Vom Flüchtlingslager in die Konzertsäle der Welt; Die Geschichte des Don Kosaken Chores," *Osteuropa* 57:5, May 2007, 62.
- ¹⁵ Irina Minsky, *Vierzig Don Kosaken*, 102.
- ¹⁶ Gospodi pomilui video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LAPZ-ZVuBhQ>
- ¹⁷ Monotonously Rings the Little Bell video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E-FdNrYYDuM>
- ¹⁸ "Don Cossack Choir Presents an Organ of Human Voices," *Albuquerque Journal*, November 7, 1934, 5.
- ¹⁹ Sterling Sorensen, "1,500 Acclaim Magnificent Singing of Cossack Chorus," *Capital Times* [Washington, D.C.], November 14, 1934, 2.
- ²⁰ "Cossack Program Termed Inspiring," *Albuquerque Journal*, November 23, 1950, 8. The choir is said to be "living up to its long-standing reputation of perfection..."
- ²¹ "World's Finest," *Globe-Gazette* [Marion City, Iowa], September 23, 1939, 4.
- ²² Herbert von Karajan and Richard Osborne, *Conversations with Karajan* (Harper & Row, 1989), 48-49.
- ²³ "Russian Chorus First Fine Arts Number at T.C.," October 23, 1939, *Denton Record Chronicle*, 3, tells how officials tried to get them back to their town for five years, but they were too busy.
- ²⁴ Richard W. Insley, "Bollofine [sic], Don Cossack Singer, Lauds America and Its Box Office Receipts," *Trinity Tripod XXXV*:4, October 18, 1938, 1-3.
- ²⁵ Irina Minsky, *Vierzig Don Kosaken*, 70.
- ²⁶ "Cossack Singers Are Preparing To Take Citizenship Papers," *Kokomo Tribune*, October 31, 1939, 12.
- ²⁷ Their immigration records are on Ancestry.com.
- ²⁸ Richard Irl Kegerreis, "History of the High School A Cappella Choir" (doctoral diss., University of Michigan, 1964), 74-75.
- ²⁹ Ivan Assur, Interview by Svetlana Zvereva, "About the Don Cossack Choir under the direction of S. A. Zharov," *Slovo*.
- ³⁰ Irina Minsky, *Vierzig Don Kosaken*, 42.
- ³¹ Although falsetrists and countertenors are technically not the same, this writer maintains that we would use the term countertenors for the singers Jaroff called falsetrists. An early article supports this: "Jaroff Cossacks Demonstrate Art," *The Gazette* [Montreal], October 7, 1947, 10, states that "the counter-tenors and deep basses" were virtuosos.
- ³² Steven West and Wassilj Flustikoff, "The Original Don Cossacks and the Music of the Don, an Interview with Serge Jaroff." *Etude LXI*: 11, November 1943: 706, 758-59.
- ³³ Editha K. Webster, "Don Cossack Chorus Thrills 2,300 with Magnificent Performance of Concert Season Here," *Sioux City Journal*, October 29, 1937: 14.
- ³⁴ Marika Kuzma, "Bortnyans'ky [Bortniansky, Dmytro Stepanovych]," *Grove Music Online*, 2001.
- ³⁵ Vladimir Morosan, *One Thousand Years of Russian Church Music* (Musica Russica, 1991), liv-lv.
- ³⁶ Irina Minsky, *Vierzig Don Kosaken*, 38.
- ³⁷ Vladimir Morosan, *Choral Performance in Pre-Revolutionary Russia* (Musica Russica, 1994), 234.
- ³⁸ Irina Minsky, *Vierzig Don Kosaken*, 38.
- ³⁹ How Glorious Is Our Lord In Zion video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mtKX2cC2sfU>
- ⁴⁰ Meadowland video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VLTFJV9HWBw>
- ⁴¹ Ataman Platoff video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AFBKNBkiOiI>
- ⁴² www.don-kosaken-chor.de/don-kosaken-chor-englisch/
- ⁴³ Image of score for "Volga Boatmen" [folk song] <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=712562284216586&set=a.470218165117667> Image of score for "Gospody pomilui" by Grigori Lvovsky [liturgical song] <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=712561994216615&set=a.470218165117667>
- ⁴⁴ Assur interview.
- ⁴⁵ www.russian-records.com/search.php?search_keywords=Jaroff
- ⁴⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2CS9C82IhPE>
- ⁴⁷ "Serge Jaroff," *New York Times*, October 8, 1985, A24.
- ⁴⁸ Irina Minsky, *Vierzig Don Kosaken*, 96.