

Serge Jaroff and His Don Cossack Choir: The Refugees Who Took the World by Storm

Donna Arnold

Abstract

Serge Jaroff's Don Cossack Choir was an improbable phenomenon. Founded at a miserable Turkish internment camp in 1920, it drew members from Don Cossack regiments expelled from Russia after the Russian Civil War. Jaroff, a detainee who had attended the Moscow Synodal School of Church Singing in Moscow, was ordered to establish and conduct it. He arranged repertoire from memory and turned thirty-six amateur singers into a world-class a cappella ensemble. Once liberated, they concertized throughout the non-Soviet world and enjoyed long-term success. Banned from Russia forever, they eventually became American citizens. Except for recent Dutch and Russian research they have received little scholarly attention, and there are no major studies about them in English. This essay describes their history, seeking to identify key components of their artistic excellence and commercial success, and advocates for further research.

For nearly sixty years, Serge Jaroff's *a cappella* Russian émigré Don Cossack Choir concertized throughout the non-Soviet world, drawing huge audiences and selling millions of records. They were a beloved concert staple in the United States,¹ and the choir's members, banished forever from Soviet Russia, eventually became American citizens.² Jaroff founded the choir late in 1920 and was its conductor throughout its existence, leading his men through the harrowing adversities of its beginnings to remarkable triumphs. Thus, it is surprising that until the twenty-first century, neither he nor his choir received substantial scholarly attention. Although Dutch³

and Russian scholars⁴ have done important research lately, their findings are not widely accessible, and there are no major studies in English. Understanding the choir's history is essential to understanding its music, both of which link inextricably with Jaroff's life story.

a new German translation of Emilian Klinsky's book *Sergiei Zharov i ego Donskoi kazachii khor*; Сергей Жаров и его Донской казачий хоръ (Berlin: Donskogo kazach'iago khora, 1931). A German translation titled *Vierzig Donkosaken erobern die Welt: S. Jaroff und sein Donkosakenchor* (Leipzig: Matthes) had come out in 1933. For Klinsky's book, Jaroff related detailed information about his early life and career. The recent translation includes updates from where Klinsky left off. In addition to their book, the study group produced a DVD and a number of digitally remastered recordings of the choir's recorded legacy.

⁴ Russian musicologist Svetlana Zvereva has done significant archival work and research in Moscow and organized a conference, "The Russian Diaspora: Music and Orthodoxy" (Moscow, 2008) which included a session entitled "Serge Jaroff's Don Cossack Choir: Its Traditions and Their Development."

¹ "Russian Chorus Appears Tonight on Star Course," *Daily Illini*, November 14, 1935, 1, states that "the chorus has become an established institution in most American cities."

² Detailed immigration records for Jaroff and many of his choir members are available through ancestry.com.

³ In their book *Vierzig Don Kosaken erobern die Welt; Don Kosaken Chor Serge Jaroff 1921–2015* (Groningen: Nederland-Rusland Centrum, 2015), Irina Minsky and her Don Cossack Choir study group at the University of Groningen provided

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This essay treats that history, seeking to identify key components of the choir's artistic excellence and commercial success, and advocates for further research.

Jaroff was born on March 20, 1896 in the small town of Makaryev, Russia.⁵ Evincing exceptional musical ability, he was admitted on scholarship to the Russian Orthodox Church's prestigious Synodal School of Church Singing in Moscow in 1906.⁶ This institution was a stronghold of the "new direction" movement in Russian sacred choral music.⁷ Notably, as a member of its famous choir, he delighted Rachmaninov in 1910 with his boy soprano solo in the public premiere of the composer's *Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom* (Литургия Иоанна Златоуста).⁸ He graduated in March 1917 with a brilliant final examination in orchestral conducting.⁹

⁵ It was far from the Don River region with which he would later be associated, a fact that most of his choir's fans never knew.

⁶ Minsky, *Vierzig Don Kosaken*, 17–18.

⁷ Vladimir Morosan, *One Thousand Years of Russian Church Music* (Washington, D.C.: Musica Russica, 1991), liv–lv, provides an excellent summary of the "new direction" and the Synodal School's connection with it. Composer Aleksandr Kastal'sky, one of its most eminent proponents, taught at the school and became its director in 1910. Svetlana Zvereva, *Alexander Kastalsky: His Life and Music* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 125–138, details the rigorous curriculum at the school, which was one of the best music schools in Russia.

⁸ Sergei Bertensson and Jay Leyda, *Sergei Rachmaninoff; A Lifetime in Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 171, quote Rachmaninov's remembrances of the incident. The solo was in number 12, "Тебе поем," or "We Sing to Thee," which would later be important in the repertoire of Jaroff's own choir.

⁹ Minsky, *Vierzig Don Kosaken*, 19. As he admitted to Klinsky, he lost his mother at an early age and had a difficult childhood. He had not always been a model student, but with this examination, his academic career ended very well. His triumph was especially remarkable because he had a wardrobe malfunction with a sleeve as he began to conduct, which caused him to lose his place in the score, whereupon he abandoned the score and proceeded to conduct brilliantly from memory.

Afterwards he attended officer training at Moscow's Alexandrov Military Academy, just as the Russian revolution was underway. Although not born a Cossack and much shorter than typical Cossack warriors, he served in the Russian Civil War that ensued as a volunteer in a Don Cossack unit.¹⁰ Traditional defenders of the Tsar, Cossacks from the Don River region fought in the White Army that opposed the Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks' Red Army decisively defeated them in Crimea in 1920, and in November the vanquished soldiers were expelled from Russia in a grim convoy of 126 ships.¹¹

The Choir's Turbulent Birth

Jaroff's regiment was part of a large group transported to an internment camp in Çilingir, Turkey, a village near Istanbul. Conditions there were horrific, and severe hunger, exposure, and a cholera epidemic killed many men. Morale in the camp was desperately low, and to help raise spirits, the division commander ordered that a choir be formed from the regimental choirs' best singers.¹² Jaroff, the only professional musician in the camp, was ordered to establish and conduct the choir. The new ensemble first performed for Russian Orthodox services on Saint Nicholas Day, December 19, 1920.¹³

¹⁰ Later the regiment's chaplain related that Jaroff served valiantly and saved many of his men's lives, including the chaplain's. (Minsky, *Vierzig Don Kosaken*, 21).

¹¹ Paul Robinson, *The White Russian Army in Exile, 1920–1941* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) offers details of this tragic mass evacuation and its aftermath. A bleak picture of several of the ships is at this Wikimedia commons site, "White Army Departure:" https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/13/White_army_departure.jpg According to Jaroff, 7,000 people were aboard the ship that transported him and the men who would eventually form his choir. (Minsky, *Vierzig Don Kosaken*, 21).

¹² Minsky, *Vierzig Don Kosaken*, 28–29. This disproves romanticized tales claiming that Jaroff and his men gathered around their campfire in the evening and simply decided that forming a choir would be a good idea.

¹³ Ibid. The regimental chaplain recalled that the music Jaroff

The men Jaroff assembled were not trained singers. Having no access to printed music, Jaroff arranged repertoire for them from memory, and in a matter of months had transformed thirty-six amateurs into what would become a world-famous ensemble. At Çilingir they won fellow soldiers' approval and even performed outside the camp.¹⁴ Jaroff kept the choir together as the regiments sailed to the Greek island of Lemnos on March 23, 1921.¹⁵ Conditions there were harsh,¹⁶ but the choristers provided comfort as they sang for Russian Orthodox services at a small local church and entertained English and French troops stationed there. Jaroff dreamed of one day having his choir sing at great Orthodox cathedrals in Eastern European countries.¹⁷

When the Don Cossack evacuees were shipped to Burgas, Bulgaria later in 1921, Jaroff again managed to keep the choir together. This trip likely took place in late August, when around 3,000 men were transported; by October, all of the camps on Lemnos had been closed.¹⁸ Soon after landing at Burgas, the choristers moved to the capital, Sofia. Although no longer detainees by then, they still faced appalling privation.¹⁹ Nevertheless, inspired by Jaroff's fierce determination, they continued to sing,

conducted for religious services with his beleaguered regimental choir had been deeply moving for the worshipers. *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 21. Bruno Bagni, "Lemnos, l'île aux Cosaques," *Cahiers du Monde Russe* 50:1, 2009, <https://journals.openedition.org/monderusse/9162> gives dates for the removal of Cossacks to Bulgaria.

¹⁶ A few pictures showing conditions are at Конгресс Казаков в Америке [Cossack Congress of America], "The Greek Island Lemnos," <http://www.kazaksusa.com/node/716>

¹⁷ Minsky, *Vierzig Don Kosaken*, 31.

¹⁸ Bagni, "Lemnos, l'île aux Cosaques."

¹⁹ "Don Cossack Choristers Were Once Ragged Soldiers," *New York Times*, September 14, 1924, X8. A Dutch League of Nations diplomat, Baron Frederik van der Hoeven, discovered the singers living so miserably in tattered tents that he feared they would die, and appealed to the King of Bulgaria to help get them into barracks.

doing menial labor by day and rehearsing at night. They became the permanent, but unpaid choir at the Russian Embassy's small church, and their music began to attract large crowds of worshipers.²⁰ In summer 1922, 5,000 people came to hear them when they sang by invitation for a service at Sofia's Saint Alexander Nevsky Cathedral. Jaroff began to believe his choir could make a living with their singing.²¹

Phenomenal Success

On June 23, 1923 Jaroff and his choir left for France to accept an offer to become the resident choir at a factory, but they ran out of money in Vienna. There an influential supporter brokered an audition with an impresario and brought them a life-changing opportunity.²² The choir gave a concert at the Hofburg Palace on July 4,²³ which proved to be groundbreaking. Although extremely nervous beforehand, the singers performed brilliantly.²⁴ It was prophetic that a huge audience in this venerable musical capital responded passionately to their singing, despite the language barrier and their shabby military attire.

²⁰ Minsky, *Vierzig Don Kosaken*, 33.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² This was the same Baron van der Hoeven who had helped save their lives in Sofia. "Don Cossack Choristers Were Once Ragged Soldiers," *New York Times*, September 14, 1924, X8, tells how he went to extraordinary means on their behalf. He appealed to the director of the Imperial Opera House to help them, mentioning his friendship with Richard Strauss to get in to see him. They auditioned for an impresario the next day.

²³ An announcement promoting this concert, which appeared in the *Neues Wiener Tageblatt* on July 1, 1923, was the first press report about the choir. An image of it is at Russian-records.com, "The World-famous Don Cossack Chorus of Serge Jaroff," https://www.russian-records.com/details.php?image_id=40135#nav

²⁴ Jaroff's account of this triumph is corroborated by various press reports. For example, "Der Kirchenchor der Donkosaken in Wien," *Neues Wiener Tageblatt*, July 7, 1923, says they performed wonderfully, and that the dashing and agile Jaroff conducted in a highly original manner. An image of the review is at Russian-records.com, https://www.russian-records.com/details.php?image_id=46676

This concert officially launched their professional career. Invitations from other cities and countries poured in, and their fame spread quickly.²⁵ The rare combination of their repertoire, distinctive style, and superb artistry thrilled audiences in Western Europe, even in countries formerly at

²⁵ For example, *The Tampa Tribune*, July 29, 1923, printed a special dispatch on page 1 called “Cossack Choir Wins Austrian Triumph,” which reported that the choir had to stay in Vienna and perform several extra concerts due to popular demand, and was on its way to a seven-week tour in Germany.

war with Russia. Russian émigrés understandably championed them, but were only a small part of their fan base. The choir’s renditions of Russian liturgical music, art songs, folk songs, traditional songs, and Cossack military songs, all sung in Russian, proved to be deeply moving to audiences from nations and cultures all over the world.

Figure 1. Jaroff’s Don Cossacks in 1930²⁶



²⁶ This image is provided by the Bibliothèque nationale de France with the statement “Rights: public domain” at <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k7931649/f5.item> and via theuropeanlibrary.org with the statement “full-text and image is public domain (1.0) [no copyright]” at <http://www.theuropeanlibrary.org/tel4/newspapers/issue/3000113812599?title=L%27Intransigent&chp=5&count=10&page=5&query=%22serge+jaroff%22> user-friendly URL: <http://www.theuropeanlibrary.org/tel4/newspapers/issue/L%27Intransigent/1931/1/11>

When Jaroff and his men began their professional career, they were destitute, and without the breakthrough in Vienna, their situation would likely have remained precarious. Giving informal concerts as they tried to reach France had not raised much money. Although Jaroff had realized his dream of conducting his choir in a great cathedral, it did not relieve their poverty, and there were no church positions for a Russian Orthodox conductor plus his 36-man choir. Whether by preference or not, it is fair to say that they went into show business to survive.

Fortuitously, Jaroff's gift for show business proved to be nearly as great as his gift for music, and he infused his choir with that gift as well.²⁷ Their showmanship contributed to a very unusual phenomenon. From the beginning, this classical ensemble attained a status like that accorded to pop stars. As many reviews reported, their audiences exhibited extreme enthusiasm that sometimes bordered on hysteria,²⁸ and autograph hounds and reporters besieged them.

Remarkably, their early success was no passing sensation. They continued to be in constant demand and drew large, devoted audiences for virtually the rest of their existence.²⁹

²⁷ Their showmanship received constant praise in reviews and promotional notices. This is typical: "The Singing Horsemen of the Steppes' Don Cossack Male Chorus one of Kellogg Features for Next Season," *Hartford Courant*, April 6, 1930, 64, says Jaroff was "one of the most radiant personalities in the music world—indeed a big show all by himself..."

²⁸ Carol Tokiko Katsuki, "Berlin Audiences Go Mad Over Music If Presented By Masters; Hundreds Rush To Stage Overwhelming Artists With Praise," *Honolulu Advertiser* Aug. 19, 1928, 28, says that "the choir's frantic audience howled, stamped their feet, and banged chairs" to demand yet more encores at a Berlin concert she attended.

²⁹ Well into their career, a review in the *Lowell Sun*, April 4, 1960, 27, "Don Cossack Chorus Packs the Auditorium," by Alfred Burke, says "their program was inspiring and the last word in performing excellence."

Even posthumously, they still attract unusually ardent fans through their recordings and filmed performances.

Decoding the Phenomenon

What did Jaroff do with his choir to affect their audiences so deeply and garner such prolonged devotion? The fact that most of their audiences could not understand the words they were singing makes this question all the more intriguing. Scrutiny of the quality and character of their music, plus their mode of presenting it, reveals many answers.

Decades of laudatory reviews make it clear that the excellence of their music was always paramount to the Don Cossacks' success. A superb arranger, Jaroff chose their entire repertoire and arranged most of it.³⁰ This practice ensured consistency of style. Although he constantly added new material, certain works were so beloved early on that they were concert staples ever after.³¹

Jaroff's original program format was so effective that it never changed. He began every concert with music of the Russian Orthodox Church, applying dramatic and highly emotional performance practices appropriate to a concert setting rather than to a church service.³² The profound spiritual

³⁰ He sometimes had help from other émigrés, especially distinguished composer Constantine Shvedoff, 1886–1954, who was also a graduate of the Synodal School. He wrote many fine secular arrangements for the choir.

³¹ A famous example was "Gospodi pomilui" (Lord, have mercy) by Grigory Lvovsky, 1830–1894, which was a perennial concert favorite throughout their history. In it they repeat the words *Gospodi pomilui* seventy-five times.

³² As Irina Minsky described it, he modified Russian Orthodox church music for classical performance. She and her research team understood that had he not done so, the music as performed in church would have been unacceptably boring to

edification described by believers who heard the Don Cossacks sing the Divine Liturgy for worship attests that Jaroff was acutely sensitive to differing concert and church exigencies.³³

Jaroff's concert renditions of this sacred music appealed to a broad spectrum of the public. Most audience members were unfamiliar with music³⁴ of the Russian church in any context until they heard the Don Cossacks' performances, but they accepted and appreciated it as classical music. His inclusion of such music was his affirmation of its vital role in Russian musical culture. His ceaseless efforts in keeping it alive and bringing it to widespread public attention grew increasingly poignant and significant as the Soviets sought to eradicate it, persecuting and even killing many of its practitioners back in Russia.³⁵ Although he and the choir refrained from publicly discussing politics, his choice of music delivered powerful messages.

their concert audiences. (Minsky, *Vierzig Don Kosaken*, 103.)

³³ Paul N. Butkoff, *Our Fight for Russia* (Commack, New York: Nova Science Publishers, 207–208) described a remarkable memorial service he experienced as a student in 1935 at the Saint Alexander Nevsky Cathedral in Sofia, with Bulgaria's Tsar Boris in attendance. The Don Cossacks sang the liturgy, and the music profoundly moved the worshipers as the angelic voices of the choir resounded throughout the huge church. 20,000 people were in attendance inside and outside the building.

³⁴ Purists of the Russian Orthodox faith found it disturbing that Jaroff included liturgical music in his concerts and performed it differently than would have been appropriate for a worship service. Western European audiences, long accustomed to hearing the Western European canon of sacred music in concert, would have felt no such compunctions.

³⁵ An announcement for a recent Russian Orthodox concert, "Concert of Sacred Music; Synodal Cathedral of the Icon of Our Lady of the Sign," points out that "Artists, composers, conductors, and singers who did not submit to the demands of the atheist regime, or who simply failed to adapt to the new reality were publicly denounced, threatened, and had their privileges revoked... And, some were killed; the list of victims of Communist oppression in the Russian Orthodox Church contains the names of several composers who were martyred for their faith and actions." https://www.brownpapertickets.com/event/3602517?fbclid=IwAR0sblcWmbvC2sXuY-q_b-cl_dmm30d6jrRoVE87yylSB0Xlz3kMtEWvo6QY

Through the choir's legacy of recordings and filmed performances, his efforts are bearing fruit now for choral practitioners striving to revive Russia's lost traditions.

The second part of each concert consisted of Russian folk songs, art songs, and traditional songs. Several of the art and traditional songs had attained folk status, having been composed so long ago that composers' names were forgotten.³⁶ Jaroff's arrangements of folk and folk-like material bespoke his classical orientation,³⁷ and were often much more intricate than was immediately apparent. Their subject matter, ranging from somber to joyous, gave the singers ideal opportunities to showcase their expressive gifts, which were so convincing that they transcended the language barrier.³⁸ At one end of the spectrum was the men's heartfelt longing for a homeland they would never see again. At the other end was their rural-inspired and soldier humor, which delighted audiences.

³⁶ For example, their beloved "Red Sarafan," an art song by Alexander Varlamov, appeared in a Russian folk song in a number of American songbooks early in the 20th century, such as Albert E. Wier's *Songs the Children Love to Sing* (New York: D. Appleton, 1916), 217. There it was called "The Scarlet Sarafan." Audio of the Don Cossacks' iconic recording, under the title "Der rote Sarafan," Don Cossack Choir-Topic, is here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TPIzggB_nok. It has been reissued on the album, *Les cosaques du Don; chants russes populaires et religieux*, Deutsche Grammophon DG 439-375-2, which is now available on Naxos Music Library.

³⁷ Vladimir Morosan, *Choral Performance in Pre-Revolutionary Russia*, 2nd ed. (Madison, CT: Musica Russica, 1994), 206, mentions an established tradition of Russian classical composers creating arrangements of folk material.

³⁸ As one reviewer explained, "the sentiment and feeling of each song was expressed in the face of each singer, making it possible without an understanding of the words to sense the emotion evoked by a song." Falsettist Basile Bolotine was singled out: "As he sang, his whole face lit up with enthusiasm; more than once did he appear to be earnestly praying as he sang. He held everyone's attention. One couldn't help but feel as though he wanted to smile or cry with him." "Famous Cossack Chorus in Coast Appearance," *Tammy Howl* 14:3 (December 15, 1931), 18.

The third part of each concert consisted of Cossack military songs. Jaroff's renditions of them were raucous and invigorating, punctuated with shrill whistles, yells, and Russian dances. Originally, a few choir members stepped forward to dance,³⁹ but from 1940 on, professional dancers took over.⁴⁰ Such lively effects provided a rousing closing section to each concert, typically eliciting many encores. Recent researches in Russia have shed welcome light on how Jaroff and his Don Cossacks exemplified Russia's strong nineteenth century military choir traditions.⁴¹

Preventing his choir's music from ever becoming boring was Jaroff's dominant objective. He explained, "I feared that the choir would develop into a singing machine, so I tried to maintain a certain tension, with fine-tuning of familiar pieces and alterations of tempo. In this way I kept constant control, preventing the choir from falling into a set pattern."⁴² The style traits that most directly resulted were pervasive use of rubato and frequent dynamic changes. The dynamic changes were drastic, ranging from thundering fortissimos to the softest of pianissimos.

Jaroff's arrangements were typically for six voice parts: falsettist, first tenor, second tenor, baritone, bass, and octavist, with frequent further subdivisions that enriched the texture.⁴³

³⁹ For example, a review in the *Albuquerque Journal*, November 7, 1934, 5, says that two choir members unexpectedly stepped forward and did a wild and whirling dance.

⁴⁰ Katharina Kucher, "Vom Flüchtlingslager in die Konzertsäle der Welt; Die Geschichte des Don Kosaken Chores," *Osteuropa* 57: 5 (May, 2007), 62.

⁴¹ Tatyana S. Rudichenko, "Military Traditions in the Activity of the Don Cossacks Choir Under the Direction of S. Zharov," *South Russian Musical Anthology* 27:2 (2017), 66–71. <http://musalm.ru/assets/almanac/alm2017-2.pdf>

⁴² An English translation of the relevant passage from Klinsky's book is at Russian-records.com, "The World-famous Don Cossack Chorus of Serge Jaroff," https://www.russian-records.com/details.php?image_id=5591

⁴³ Steven West and Wassilj Flustikoff, "The Original Don

His inclusion of octavists, the legendary Russian basses who sing an octave below normal bass range, was conventional at the time.⁴⁴ However, he broke new ground by introducing falsettists (countertenors), thus greatly expanding the choir's range and repertoire.⁴⁵ Significantly, they enabled performance of mixed-range masterpieces from the Russian Orthodox liturgy. How he found or trained his falsettists, both at the outset and later, is unclear, as is the role of falsetto singing in contemporaneous Russian musical culture.⁴⁶

In choral sonority, emulation of a string ensemble was Jaroff's avowed ideal.⁴⁷ Numerous reviews mention that audiences appreciatively compared their sound to that of an orchestra or a great organ. Similar terminology had described various earlier Russian choirs, and composers and conductors at the Synodal School were reported to have experimented with choral-orchestra concepts.⁴⁸ How such precedents may have influenced Jaroff awaits investigation.

Cossacks and the Music of the Don, an Interview with Serge Jaroff," *Etude* LXI 11 (November, 1943), 758.

⁴⁴ Morosan, *Choral Performance*, 153, states that octavists were a familiar phenomenon in Russian choirs by the late 19th century.

⁴⁵ Minsky, *Vierzig Don Kosaken*, 38. It should be noted that at the beginning, using the falsettists would have been an astute way for him to recreate works he remembered from the Synodal Choir, which consisted of boys and men.

⁴⁶ West and Flustikoff, "The Original Don Cossacks," 758, quotes Jaroff as saying that Russians accept the falsetto as a legitimate vocal part, but he gave no details.

⁴⁷ Minsky, *Vierzig Don Kosaken*, 38.

⁴⁸ For example, Morosan, *Choral Performance*, 58, quotes Aleksandr Nikolsky, who had sung in the Synodal Choir, as saying its overall sound approached that of a string quartet. Claudia Nikol'skaya-Beregovskaya, "The Birth and Evolution of the Choral Art in Russia," *International Choral Bulletin* (October 15, 2013), http://icb.ifcm.net/en_US/birth-evolution-choral-art-russia/ says that the most striking feature of Bortn'yansky's choir was its organ sound, and that under Stepan Smolensky (1848–1909) and Vasily Orlov (1865–1907), the Synodal choir transformed from a choir into a kind of choral orchestra.

Jaroff favored the technique of having some of his singers hum while others sang words. It would have been familiar to him from his earlier experience in the Synodal Choir, for when he impressed Rachmaninov in the piece we know as “We Sing to Thee,” the choir hummed as he sang his solo.⁴⁹ He also featured long, totally-hummed passages,⁵⁰ and variants of humming were sometimes responsible for instrumental effects audiences perceived. Humming became a Don Cossack trademark.

In voicing and interpreting his arrangements, Jaroff was masterful at exploiting the timbres of all of the parts.⁵¹ His falsettist and octavist sections became especially renowned, and their framing of the rich and smoothly-blended inner voices gave the choir a signature sonority that was aesthetically very compelling. It is particularly noticeable in their liturgical music, which ranged from classic-era works by composers such as Bortnyans’ky and Vedel to works by twentieth century “new direction” composers such as Kastal’sky and Rachmaninov.⁵² Much of the Russian Orthodox liturgy is sung *a cappella*, for the use of instruments is forbidden.⁵³ Understanding of the words is considered crucial, which has resulted in predominantly chordal rather than contrapuntal writing.⁵⁴ The

⁴⁹ Rachmaninov stated that “the choir provided a humming accompaniment for a boy soprano solo.” (Bertensson and Leyda, *Sergei Rachmaninoff*, 171.)

⁵⁰ “How Glorious is our Lord in Zion” was a particularly beloved work that featured their extensive humming. One of their recordings of it is no. 8 on the 3-CD set produced by Irina Minsky and her study group at the University of Groningen, *Don Cossack Choir Serge Jaroff 1921–2013* (Slava SL0400).

⁵¹ Minsky, *Vierzig Don Kosaken*, 103.

⁵² The scope of their repertoire encompassed the time frame of Russia’s western-influenced liturgical choral music, which first gained major significance in the Classic era.

⁵³ Milos Velimirović, “Russian and Slavonic Church Music,” *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd ed., ed. Stanley Sadie, v. 21 (New York: Macmillan, 2001), 903.

⁵⁴ Morosan, *Choral Performance*, 233.

homophonic texture and elemental tonal harmony in much of the Don Cossacks’ liturgical repertoire bring their distinctive sonority into stark relief.

Due to the large influx of Russian émigrés into Europe in the 1920s and 1930s, Jaroff was gradually able to replace departing founding members, who initially were amateurs, with outstanding professional singers.⁵⁵ Many founding members had become accomplished vocal artists,⁵⁶ but the participation of the professionals nevertheless gradually refined the sonority of the ensemble, and fostered greater depths of artistic maturity than ever before. In 1947, a reviewer marveled that “a choral group which in its early days built its large following upon highly expert novelty effects should now be holding its large audiences by sheer artistic excellence.”⁵⁷

Frequent solo and small-ensemble passages adorned many of Jaroff’s arrangements, and he featured soloists, including founding members and professionals from all of the sections, in his concerts and recordings. Through the choir’s recorded legacy, we can hear many of these soloists today in formats ranging from 78 rpm records to digital downloads. Some of the outstanding soloists, especially those who remained in the choir for many years, became iconic figures.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, in the spirit of

⁵⁵ Minsky, *Vierzig Don Kosaken*, 84.

⁵⁶ In an interview by Svetlana Zvereva, “About the Don Cossack Choir under the direction of S. A. Zharov,” *Slovo*, https://www.portal-slovo.ru/art/36026.php?ELEMENT_ID=36026&SHOWALL_1=1 bass Ivan Assur, who had joined the choir after World War II, passed on the anecdote that after one of their concerts, Chaliapin, who had attended, said that bass Michael Bajanoff, who was a founding member, sang liturgical music better than he did. Chaliapin was a supporter of the choir and had made a recording with them.

⁵⁷ Colin Sabiston, “High Artistry of Don Cossacks Features Concert,” *Globe and Mail*, Toronto, October 13, 1947, 10.

⁵⁸ For example, Basile Bolotine, falsettist; Ivan Beresoff, bass; Paul Myhalik, octavist; Boris Morosoff, bass; Konstantin

democracy that pervaded the choir, they were required to maintain a low profile in concert. They did not step forward to sing their solos or acknowledge applause.⁵⁹ The choir presented itself as a unit in which every member mattered.

Jaroff trained his choir to a technical level for which it was world famous, with a precision in attacks and cutoffs, intonation, diction, blend, dynamics, and tempi that thrilled audiences and critics alike, and heightened their expressive powers. In the early 1930s, distinguished American music critic Deems Taylor stated that this was the best chorus he had ever heard or ever hoped to hear.⁶⁰ Fortunately, there are many recorded examples of their exceptional technique. Their re-released recordings of the Divine Liturgy and liturgical songs provide fine examples.⁶¹ Unfortunately, however, no substantial written description of the rehearsal methods Jaroff used to achieve such precision has yet come to light. It is urgent for any participants and observers who still remember those rehearsals to relate their knowledge.

In concert Jaroff had an unusually restrained conducting style. The singers usually stood in two parallel lines or semi-circles. They were required to memorize all of their music so that they could watch Jaroff intently at all times. He typically

Jurkevics, tenor.

⁵⁹ There are a number of examples on YouTube that show the choir in its usual formation of two parallel lines, with the soloists standing unobtrusively in line as they sang their solos. In the early years the soloists were not identified in programs in the United States, so reviewers did not know their names. Nevertheless, audiences appreciated them greatly, and it is disappointing that by now, there seems to be very little information about most of them.

⁶⁰ This quote was often repeated in the choir's promotional materials, for example, in *The Winnipeg Tribune*, October 6, 1934, 15.

⁶¹ *Divine Liturgy and Requiem Mass*, Slava SL 1003 CD, streaming audio, 2012. *Liturgical Songs*, Slava SL 1005, Streaming audio, 2012.

conveyed desired effects via facial expressions and very subtle hand motions, most of which were not visible to audiences.⁶² Fortunately, there are film clips from the choir's early, middle, and late periods that show examples of this.⁶³

Jaroff related that Rachmaninov, who mentored him early in his career, advised him to conduct in such manner.⁶⁴ He apparently did not name others who influenced his conducting style, and no studies seem to address this topic. He learned to conduct at the Synodal School, which was renowned for its conductors. Before the Soviets disbanded the choir in 1918, the last music director was the highly-esteemed Nicolai Danilin, 1878–1945,⁶⁵ who conducted the choir in which Jaroff sang. It is likely that Danilin's great artistry influenced the nascent young conductor, whether or not he mentioned it.

Although commentators constantly marveled at the unusual economy of Jaroff's conducting style, they overlooked something far more important. He interpreted every work in minute detail, giving careful attention to almost every sonority. This resulted in the extremely expressive rubatos and dynamic contrasts for which the Don Cossacks were famous.

⁶² Ivan Assur, in his interview by Svetlana Zvereva, said "you should always look at him—and at the eyes, and at the mouth, and at the hands, and at the eyebrows, because all this means something. He always had some nuances, always creativity on the stage."

⁶³ Countless reviews comment on his restrained style. A video on YouTube from Minsky Archief, Оригинальный хор ДОНСКИХ КАЗАКОВ сергея жарова, Don Cossack Choir Serge Jaroff, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R8WftavFbY> provides an excellent early example, particularly from 1:42 forward.

⁶⁴ Minsky, *Vierzig Don Kosaken*, 42.

⁶⁵ Morosan, *Choral Performance*, 95–200, details this great conductor's impressive achievements in his chapter titled "The Choral Conductors."

As the choristers achieved celebrity status, they had to fulfill fans' expectations by performing favorite works in every concert. Jaroff maintained interest for both performers and listeners by interpreting the works differently every time they performed them,⁶⁶ and also by periodically creating new arrangements of them. Recordings and film clips exemplifying this give a fascinating vignette of what must have occurred in concert over the years.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Minsky, *Vierzig Don Kosaken*, 86.

⁶⁷ For example, a rendition of the song "By Jordan River," by Kirill Grigor'yevich Stetsenko, is on the album *Near the River Don*, Slava SL1004; it is available on Naxos Music Library and Spotify. A remarkably different rendition is on the album *Don Kosaken Chor Serge Jaroff*, Deutsche Grammophon DGG 136 457, currently accessible on YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fmINDPMhmu8>

As numerous reviews document, extra-musical factors contributed significantly to the choir's concert success. The men always marched onto the stage with precise military discipline, and even after they could well have afforded something more elaborate, they continued to wear austere military uniforms that resembled what they had worn in battle: black tunics with belts, baggy dark blue trousers with a red stripe down each side, and high black boots. These master showmen made such deportment and attire very appealing to the audiences, who always loved the whole scenario.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ "Like the Movies," *Time* XVI: 20 (Nov. 17, 1930), 42, reported, "First the singers filed on stage, impressive in uniforms copied from the ones they wore in the army of Tsar Nicholas: black, belted tunics, dark blue breeches with a single scarlet stripe, high black boots. Then fast as a flying beetle came Jaroff. He flashed one shining smile which seemed to include everyone from parquet to gallery, then turned, crouched, lifted his little elbows and brought forth an amazing burst of sound."

Figure 2. Jaroff's Don Cossacks in concert, Maastricht, 1956⁶⁹



⁶⁹ This picture is in the public domain with statement "Can I use it? Yes free reuse" at https://www.europeana.eu/portal/en/record/2021646/HttpHandler_icoon_ico_file_2168985.html?q=serge+jaroff

The most important extra-musical factor of all was Jaroff's height. The manner in which he, a slender man only four feet ten-and-a-half inches tall, exercised such strict control of his giant Cossacks, fascinated and delighted audiences throughout the choir's history. Virtually every reviewer of their concerts in the United States mentioned Jaroff's short stature, as did most of their pre-concert publicity. "Pint-sized" was a favorite epithet for him. Although this was a key factor in their public image, it must have been painful for him to endure inordinate emphasis on it year after year. His stature was undoubtedly vital to the organization's showmanship, but it had nothing to do with his musicianship.

Further Details of the Choir's Remarkable History

By the mid-1920s, the Don Cossacks were touring extensively in many European countries, routinely playing to packed houses. In 1926 they toured Australia and New Zealand with great success. They began making 78 rpm commercial recordings in 1925, first for Artiphon and later for labels such as Columbia and Decca, and they were soon featured in movies, as well.⁷⁰

As the choristers prepared for their first tour of the United States in the fall of 1930, Jaroff was very apprehensive about how American audiences would receive them. His fears were unfounded, however, for they immediately triumphed, and numerous extra concerts were added for people who could not get tickets to the sold-out performances.⁷¹ Hearing them for the

⁷⁰ https://www.russianrecords.com/details.php?image_id=5591 provides citations for all of these early records.

⁷¹ "Cossack Chorus, to Sing in City Dec. 4, Acclaimed by Gotham," *Lansing State Journal*, Nov. 6, 1930, 2, reports that extra concerts were added in New York City after their November 4 debut concert.

first time, the American choral community was enthralled by the brilliance of their technique and learned much that would enhance the quality of American choral singing.⁷² The Don Cossacks would return to the United States annually to wide acclaim throughout the 1930s, performing hundreds of concerts all over the country in venues as grand as Carnegie Hall and the Metropolitan Opera House, and as modest as small-town college and high school auditoriums.

It was in Germany, a country renowned for its men's choirs, that the Don Cossacks were most greatly loved. Initially they, with their families, were based in Berlin. Legally, however, they were men without a country. They traveled on special "Nansen" passports for displaced persons, the words "en voyage" substituting for the name of their country.⁷³ As war threatened in Europe in the 1930s,⁷⁴ Jaroff made the momentous decision to move them to the United States. Their popularity proved advantageous, for the U.S. government supported them in relocating to New York City and pursuing American

⁷² Richard Irl Kegerreis, "History of the High School A Cappella Choir," (doctoral dissertation, University of Michigan, 1964), 74-75, says the Don Cossacks' parallel thirds in the high voices, wide intervals between the lower voices, and frequent dividing of parts to make six- or eight-voice chords gave the Russian liturgical compositions and folk song arrangements full, strong sonorities, and that their chordal style was the basis for much of the composing and arranging for American a cappella choirs.

⁷³ "Like the Movies," *Time* XVI: 20 (Nov. 17, 1930), 42. Cara Giomo, "The Little-Known Passport That Protected 450,000 Refugees," *Atlas Obscura*, <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/nansen-passport-refugees> details how Lenin had revoked the Russian citizenship of all expatriates in December 1921. Realizing what a catastrophe this portended, Norwegian League of Nations diplomat Fridtjof Nansen created the Nansen Passport, to enable the refugees to travel and avoid deportation.

⁷⁴ Richard W. Insley, "Bollofine [sic], Don Cossack Singer, Lauds America and its Box Office Receipts," *Trinity Tripod* XXXV:4, pp. 1, 3, quoted Basile Bolotine, falsetto soloist and frequent choir spokesman, as saying that Germany was too much like an army camp, which he had learned to despise during his service in Russia.

citizenship. Their international touring schedules prevented them from meeting the continuous-residency requirement, but for them the requirement was waived.⁷⁵

The men were not, as some reviews have said, officially inducted as citizens in a mass ceremony. Rather, immigration records show that in 1936, individual members applied for and on various dates received permanent-resident status. Some sources say they were on tour in the United States when World War II broke out in Europe on September 1, 1939,⁷⁶ but newspaper articles tell a different story. They were actually on tour in Germany, which posed serious difficulties. However, they managed to escape to neutral Norway, where they negotiated passage on a Norwegian ship that took them safely to the United States for their fall tour. To pay for their passage, they gave a concert every day.⁷⁷

New York passenger lists from ancestry.com corroborate that information. They show that the choir travelled from Oslo aboard the Norwegian ship Stavangerfjord on September 16, 1939, arriving in New York on September 26. Fortunately, their permanent-resident status assured them of safe harbor in what would be their new country. On various dates in 1943, Jaroff and most of his choir members applied for, and attained, American citizenship.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ "Don Cossack Chorus on Concert League Program," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, October 7, 1938, 12.

⁷⁶ One such source is the choir's timeline on russian-record.com, https://www.russian-records.com/details.php?image_id=5591

⁷⁷ "Singers, Coming Here, Have Difficulty in Leaving Europe," *Emporia Gazette*, September 28, 1939, 12.

⁷⁸ According to immigration records on ancestry.com, Jaroff attained American citizenship on April 5, 1943. https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/interactive/7733/imusany1824_1296-00167/2530992?backurl=&ssrc=&backlabel=Return

While World War II raged, the choir was unable to perform in Europe, but gave many concerts in the United States, and in Central and South America. They also performed for American troops in various locations. After the war they performed for American occupation forces in Germany, an audience which included a very appreciative General Dwight D. Eisenhower.⁷⁹ Around that time, Jaroff downsized the choir from about 36 to 22 members, which remained the norm thereafter.⁸⁰

One benefit from the war was that it brought Jaroff excellent new recruits, for many people from the Soviet Union were displaced in the wartime chaos. Michael Minsky and Ivan Assur would prove to be notable examples. The choir would soon resume touring extensively in West Germany and other parts of Western Europe, but the Soviet Union was forever off-limits. As the Iron Curtain came down, countries that became part of the Soviet-controlled Eastern Bloc also became off-limits.

The late 1940s and the 1950s were a very fruitful time for the Don Cossacks. They made many recordings in the United States and Germany, gave many memorable concerts,⁸¹ and performed

⁷⁹ "Cossack chorus and dancers ready for gala performance," *Lincoln Journal Star*, November 20, 1945, 1. This article also mentions that during the war, they sang hundreds of times for American troops in camps, at U.S.O. and Red Cross shows, and in hospitals. Isabel Ellis, "Cossack Chorus Captures Delight of North Texans," *Campus Chat*, February 8, 1946, 2, quotes choir spokesman Vasily Flustikoff as saying that they sang at the farewell party General Eisenhower gave for his staff once the war was over. He went backstage to compliment them and requested that they sing two encores, "Meadowland" and "The Volga Boat Song," just for him; they gladly complied. <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapth313430/m1/2/zoom/?q=serge%20jaroff&resolution=3&lat=5704.970824774766&lon=3935.1428833007826>

⁸⁰ Ivan Assur, interview by Svetlana Zvereva, mentioned that the choir was downsized after the war.

⁸¹ The concerts they gave at Berlin's huge *Sportpalast* for the first time after the war were stunningly successful, and were

prominently in two German feature films, *Das Donkosaken Lied* in 1956 and *Alle Tage ist kein Sonntag* in 1959. They also travelled to Japan, where they were the first westerners ever to perform for the Emperor in the Imperial Palace.⁸² They continued a heavy touring schedule in the United States.

Their recorded legacy strongly suggests that the choir was at its finest during those years. For example, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, they made recordings of the Russian Orthodox Divine Liturgy. It is important to note that those recordings were intended for émigrés too far from Orthodox churches to attend services,⁸³ and include the participation of clergy. Thus, they exemplify Jaroff's church rather than his concert style. In the early and mid-1950s, they made iconic recordings of several of their most beloved secular concert favorites, such as "Monotonously Rings the Little Bell," "The Red Sarafan," and "The Volga Boat Song."⁸⁴ Those recordings were often reissued, and continue to be reissued to this day. Such sacred and secular examples present them at the epitome of the technical and expressive excellence that earned them their high reputation.

In the 1960s the Don Cossacks enjoyed marked success in Germany. They made seven TV specials for the West Deutsche Rundfunk network,⁸⁵ and released successful new recordings

quick sellouts. Once again, extra concerts had to be scheduled. Minsky, *Vierzig Don Kosaken*, 71.

⁸² Heorhii Shybanov, "Serge Jaroff's Don Cossack Choir," *Day* (день) 2, 2010, <https://day.kyiv.ua/en/article/culture/serge-jaroffs-don-cossack-choir>

⁸³ Ivan Assur, interview by Svetlana Zvereva, provided details of this.

⁸⁴ "Eintönig klingt hell das Glöcklein" [Monotonously Rings the Little Bell], 1953, Deutsche Grammophon DG 62 917 A; "Der rote Sarafan" [The Red Sarafan], 1953, Deutsche Grammophon DG 62 915 A; "Wolgaschlepper" [Volga Boat Song], 1953, Deutsche Grammophon DG 62 919 A.

⁸⁵ On the DVD that Irina Minsky and her study group at the

and LP compilations. In 1965 the prestigious European record label, Deutsche Grammophon Gesellschaft, honored them with its first-ever Golden Grammophon Award, recognizing them for their dedication to excellence of musical interpretation and outstanding service to music world-wide.⁸⁶

By the late 1960s Jaroff was in his seventies, and dwindling press reports in the United States reflect that the choir no longer toured as extensively as it once had. Furthermore, the consistent technical brilliance that had formerly characterized it was lacking.⁸⁷ There were even rumors that they might disband around 1971, the fiftieth anniversary of its existence. Still Jaroff did not want to give up, although the Cold War political situation made it very difficult to find the caliber of artists he formerly could have engaged to replace great singers he lost. The choir made its last tour in Europe in 1979, although it continued to perform in the United States for two more years.⁸⁸

Jaroff officially disbanded the choir on his birthday, March 20, 1981, and transferred its rights to his long-time European concert manager, Otto Hofner.⁸⁹ In failing health,⁹⁰ he

University of Groningen produced, *Don Cossack Choir; Serge Jaroff* (Zwolle: Slava Z0003-DVD, 2012) there are excerpts from all of those German TV specials.

⁸⁶ *Billboard*, October 23, 1965, 41.

⁸⁷ Robert Sherman, "Don Cossack Chorus Heard at Carnegie," *New York Times* April 3, 1967, 39, says "the chorus no longer has the faultless precision of old, or the smooth vocal blend." Yet he goes on to praise them for "their ability to excite, almost to hypnotize an audience." Soloists George Tymczenko, Michael Minsky, and Basile Bolotine were singled out for praise.

⁸⁸ In her notes to the DVD *Don Cossack Choir; Serge Jaroff*, Slava Z 0003, Irina Minsky states that the choir still performed for two more years. Lentz, Kathi D., "Russian Singer Lives for Music," *Daily Journal* [Vineland, NJ], March 26, 1982, p. 20, says that when Jaroff was 85 years old, an assistant conducted for him on stage, but he sat in a chair on the side of the stage.

⁸⁹ Minsky, *Vierzig Don Kosaken*, 76.

⁹⁰ "Obituaries: Serge Jaroff, founded chorus," *Asbury Park Press*,

died in New Jersey on October 9, 1985, at the age of 89. His wife Neonila and his son Alexei survived him. Services were held at his home church, St. Mary's Russian Orthodox Church in Jackson, New Jersey, and he was interred in its cemetery. A larger and more elaborate memorial service took place in New York City at Protection of the Holy Virgin Cathedral in 1988.⁹¹

Epilogue

Jaroff sensed that the choir would die with him, but nevertheless explored ways for it to continue after he was gone. It did, for a short while in 1986, when distinguished baritone Michael Minsky, an opera star who sang with Jaroff from 1964 until 1979, conducted on a tour with famous Swedish/Russian tenor Nicolai Gedda as soloist. Unfortunately, Minsky became ill and could not continue long.⁹²

A few years later, however, Jaroff's hopes for his choir's continuance eventually came to a lasting fruition. After the initial meteoric rise of the Jaroff choir, a number of other ensembles calling themselves Cossack choirs had sprung up in various European countries. Some of them were considered excellent and enjoyed long careers.⁹³ Considering the timing of their founding, it seems likely that virtually all of them tried somehow to imitate Jaroff's

choir and capitalize on his fame and reputation. A surprising number of such copycat choirs are still active in Germany.⁹⁴

Dismayed that inferior copycat choirs were damaging Jaroff's reputation after his death by falsely claiming connections with him, two of Jaroff's former soloists revived the choir in Germany in 1991. One was his youngest soloist, Wanja Hlibka, who sang for him during his last twelve years as conductor; the other was fellow soloist George Tymczenko. They assembled former members, and with Hlibka as conductor, founded the "Don Kosaken Solisten," achieving marked success. In 2001, Otto Hofner officially authorized Hlibka to continue the Don Cossack Choir.⁹⁵ It is now called the "Don Kosaken Chor Serge Jaroff," and tours extensively, mainly in Germany.

Unlike in Germany, where Jaroff and his original choir are still widely known and revered, in the United States they largely faded from public attention after Jaroff's retirement and passing. In 2007, however, he was in the news again when the *New York Times* carried a story that his personal effects had been abandoned at his small house in New Jersey.⁹⁶ That incident had important repercussions for Jaroff research. Through Russian musicologist Dr. Svetlana Zvereva and her husband, Scottish musicologist Dr. Stuart Campbell, many of those materials were retrieved and donated to Moscow's Glinka Museum of Musical Culture.

October 7, 1985, A12, says that "Mr. Jaroff suffered several strokes during the last year and his health declined steadily."

⁹¹ A video including both part of the funeral service and part of the memorial service has been posted on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kRS7B8SyEDo>

⁹² A Facebook page devoted to him states this: https://www.facebook.com/pg/Michael-Gregory-Minsky-168105796728604/about/?ref=page_internal

⁹³ Nicholas Kostrukoff's General Platoff Don Cossack Chorus was particularly successful. A former member describes it here: <https://generalplatoffdoncossackchorus.com/about/>

⁹⁴ In 2007, Kucher, "Vom Flüchtlingslager in die Konzertsäle der Welt," *Osteuropa* 57:5 p. 57 said there were two or three dozen around.

⁹⁵ Wanja Hlibka's choir's website, <https://www.don-kosaken-chor.de/der-chor-heute/> tells of Hofner's giving him the rights to continue the choir officially.

⁹⁶ Kareem Fahim, "From a Trash Bin, Singing Cossacks and a Bitter Dispute," *New York Times*, November 3, 2007, B1.

Father Andrei Diakonov, a Russian Orthodox archpriest, has been very active in repatriating the choir to Russia since the fall of the Soviet Union. With help from former Jaroff chorister Ivan Assur, he amassed a vast private collection of recordings and other memorabilia, some of which he publicized in Russia via recordings and a television documentary.⁹⁷ He became keenly interested in the choir while a seminary student in Russia in the 1980s. Though Jaroff's liturgical recordings were totally banned, they were somehow smuggled in and passed around among choral cognoscenti in Diakonov's circle, and he was astounded and deeply moved by what he heard.⁹⁸ Here was a precious living example of what the Soviets had tried to suppress for so long.

Irina Minsky, widow of Michael Minsky, holds an important collection of Jaroff materials at the Minsky Archief in the Netherlands. Through her tireless efforts, a large portion of the choir's recorded legacy was reissued recently and is readily available through services such as Naxos Music Library, Spotify, and iTunes.⁹⁹ As cited above, she and her study group at the University of Groningen published a new German translation of Emilian Klinsky's 1931 biographical study of Jaroff, with post-1931 updates. They also produced an informative documentary DVD about the choir, with commentary in both English and Russian. Ardent fans continue to make significant contributions to Jaroff research, particularly in discography.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ This documentary is currently available in Russian on YouTube, "Как казаки мир покорили..." [How the Cossacks Conquered the World...], <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H2wyBQSD-7A>

⁹⁸ Daria Grovina, "Russian choir that Russia has not heard," *Foma* 9:137 (September 2014) <http://translate.google.com/translate?hl=en&sl=ru&u=https://foma.ru/russkiy-hor-kotorogo-ne-slyishala-rossiya.html&prev=search>

⁹⁹ Minsky's previously-cited study group at the University of Groningen was also involved with the recording projects.

¹⁰⁰ An excellent comprehensive discography is available at https://www.russian-records.com/search.php?search_

Despite these efforts, the situation is complex and difficult for scholars in the United States who are interested in researching Jaroff and his choir. Important Dutch and Russian sources are not readily accessible here. For example, Irina Minsky's book was apparently not marketed in this country. Few of our libraries hold print copies of Russian music journals and congress reports which contain pertinent articles, and such materials have not yet been digitized. Furthermore, very few of Jaroff's arrangements have ever been published.¹⁰¹ Although they could only provide the barest outlines of his interpretations in concert, they constitute a cultural treasure which deserves to be preserved. Since Hlibka's professional choir uses Jaroff's choral library for their performances, they understandably have a proprietary interest in retaining exclusive access.

In the United States, newspaper reviews are the most abundant source of information about Jaroff and his choir. Since their travels took them to hundreds of large and small cities in various regions, there is input from all over the country, and reviews confirm that all through the years they played to packed houses and their concerts had an electrifying effect on their audiences. Publicists' input notwithstanding, descriptions of the ardent enthusiasm they generated and the aesthetic experiences they evoked were undoubtedly genuine.¹⁰²

[keywords=Jaroff](#). More general discographic information is on the page about the choir's history, https://www.russian-records.com/details.php?image_id=5591

¹⁰¹ These editions are held by a few academic libraries: *Album of Russian folk songs, from the repertoire of Don Cossack chorus under the direction of Serge Jaroff*, edited by Constantin Shvedoff. New York: C. & C. Music Printing Corp., 1938; and *Populiarnyia russkiiia narodnyia piesni: iz repertuara donskogo kazach'tago khora: regent Sergieĭ Zharov*, edited by Issay Dobrowen. Berlin: J. J. Mulmanns, 1927. The arrangements give very little idea of how Jaroff and his choir actually performed the pieces.

¹⁰² A touching report of what their performances meant to listeners is found in "Don Cossack Chorus Praised Highly By Local Audience," *Mount Pleasant News* [Mount Pleasant,

It was perhaps because Jaroff and his Don Cossacks enjoyed such widespread popular success that classical music scholars, including authorities on Russian choral music, largely ignored them or gave them only perfunctory consideration during the long span of their career. However, the prospects for new research are currently very favorable. Although we can no longer hear them live, contemporary scholars are in a good position in other ways to study their work, for by now most of their legacy of recordings and films is readily available. This was certainly not the case in their heyday, when some of their best work, in particular the liturgical, may well have been unknown to many fans and scholars.

Topics for research abound, and many important questions await answers. For example, has in-depth information about Jaroff's rehearsal techniques been preserved anywhere? What is known about the musical backgrounds of the amateur founding members and of the professional singers who joined the choir in later decades? What kind of tutelage did Jaroff provide for them to obtain the results he wanted? How did traditions and high standards he learned in the Synodal Choir inform his own work? What were the distinctive style features of his arrangements? How did his style as an arranger evolve over the years? In-depth study is urgently needed to shed light on these and many other important questions.

It is encouraging that Russian scholars and Russian choral practitioners have begun to study and learn from Jaroff and his choir since the fall

of the Soviet Union.¹⁰³ Their background and insights can provide analysis and understanding of this music for which those of us from the Western European tradition are not equipped.

Their efforts, as well as information and resources from anyone who had direct contact with the choir, are crucial to the research that waits to be done.

In researching the Don Cossacks, it is vital not to forget that Jaroff and his choir went into show business when they were struggling to survive. It is intriguing to imagine what they might have achieved if fate had consigned them to a Russian Orthodox cathedral rather than to the concert stage. They would undoubtedly have been a much different choir. Interestingly enough, however, had they only excelled as a cathedral choir, far fewer people would have heard them, and by now they would likely be forgotten. Instead, through modern technology, they remain a compelling source of living music.

In addition to the recordings on streaming audio services, and the recently-released CDs and DVD, there are hundreds of videos on YouTube. Individual songs from various eras, entire albums, clips from their TV specials and films, and even entire TV specials and feature films are all available. Choral scholars, choral practitioners, and those who love classical choral music have an excellent opportunity to study and appreciate one of the most remarkable choirs of our time.

Iowa], January 20, 1947, 1. The Don Cossacks had given a concert at a Methodist college, and Jaroff asked if he could have a copy of their denomination's hymnal. The president of the college gave him one, inscribing it "in token of appreciation for one of the finest evenings of my life."

¹⁰³ For example, there is now a choral festival, called the Jaroff Singing Assembly, which is held in his memory in his home town of Makaryev every three years. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PIUoj98P_cU

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