

A World Famous, Yet Unknown, Countertenor: Basile Bolotine of Serge Jaroff's Don Cossack Choir

Donna Arnold



Donna Arnold

prov·e·nance (prŏv' ə nāns) *n.* Place of origin, source. [LAT. *Provenire*, to originate.]

WELL BEFORE COUNTERTENORS BECAME PROMINENT in classical music's early music movement of the mid-twentieth century, countless concertgoers in Europe and America had already experienced their artistry. This was because Serge Jaroff's Don Cossack Choir, a world famous *a cappella* Russian émigré ensemble, showcased singers they called falsettists. We now would call them countertenors. Basile Bolotine (1895–1981) was a beloved falsettist in the choir for many years, and thanks to his recorded legacy, his music is still cherished. Because his name has never been well-known, this essay seeks to introduce him by name both to those who have and have not yet experienced his music.

The choir had an extraordinary history. It was founded late in 1920 at a wretched internment camp in Turkey. Thousands of Don Cossack soldiers who were expelled from Russia after losing the civil war to the Bolsheviks were detained there. To raise their morale, the camp commander ordered that a choir be formed from the best singers in the regimental choirs. Detainee Serge Jaroff (1896–1985), a graduate of Moscow's prestigious Synodal School of Church Singing, was ordered to establish it.¹ All of his potential choristers were amateurs.

Against all odds, he selected thirty-six men, arranged repertoire for them from memory, and in a few months transformed them into a brilliant world class ensemble. Despite daunting circumstances, they worked hard to hone their craft after the troops were transported to the island of Lemnos in March of 1921 and freed in Bulgaria later that year. They attracted influential supporters who, cognizant of their precarious hand to mouth existence, exerted strenuous efforts to help them undertake a professional career.²

It began with a groundbreaking concert at Vienna's Hofburg Palace on July 4, 1923. Still dressed in their shabby military attire, they sang so expressively and with such superb technique that the huge audience, which had attended mainly out of curiosity, was ecstatic.³ They became internationally famous overnight, were booked for tours immediately, and would enthrall millions of people in the non-Soviet world for nearly sixty years (Figure 1).

Journal of Singing, March/April 2022
Volume 78, No. 4, pp. #-#
<https://doi.org/##.#####/#####>
Copyright © 2022
National Association of Teachers of Singing

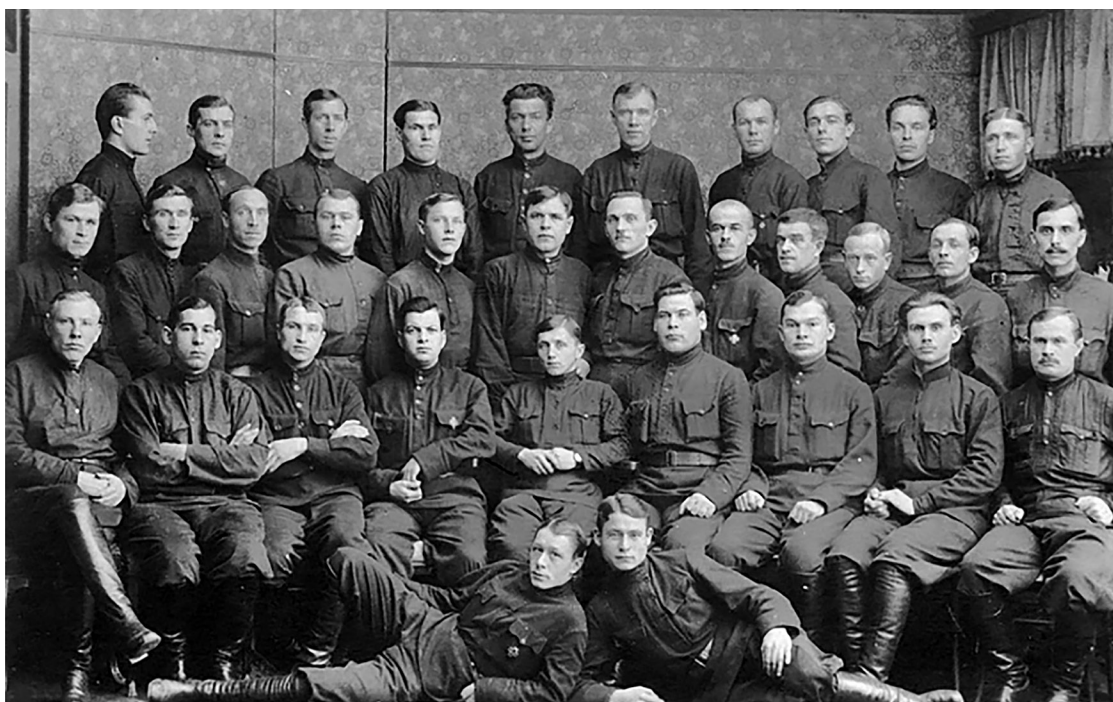


Figure 1. The choir in Bregenz, Austria, December 1923; Serge Jaroff, who was of very short stature, is sitting in the middle of the front row.⁴

As founding members occasionally left the choir, Jaroff was able to replace them with outstanding professionals from the Russian émigré community. Basile Bolotine was one of them (Figure 2). He joined the choir in 1930, and was already the featured falsetto soloist in their 1930 recording of Aliabiev's "The Nightingale."⁵ He would go on to play a vital role in their stellar career, last singing with them around 1970.

There is very little information about Bolotine's life. He was born in Kiev, Ukraine on January 1, 1895.⁷ He, too, had fought on the losing side of the Russian Civil War and escaped from Russia in 1919.⁸ His recorded legacy attests that he was a highly trained singer, but no information has come to light about his musical background except that he was a tenor soloist in another Cossack choir before

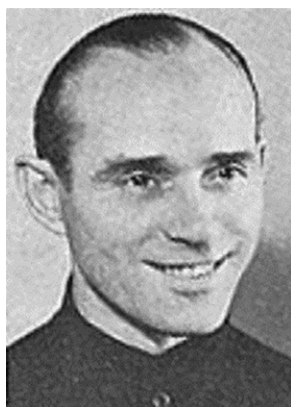


Figure 2. Bolotine in his Cossack uniform, 1930s.⁶

joining Jaroff's ensemble.⁹ He married a woman named Ksenia in Yugoslavia in 1921, and their son, Vladimir, was born in 1922.

Any exile who had opposed the Bolsheviks was cruelly deprived of Russian citizenship in 1922. Therefore, Jaroff's choristers, although based in Berlin for years, were stateless. Providentially, however, their untenable situation would improve dramatically after 1930. In the fall of that year, they began to make annual tours of the United States with phenomenal success (Figure 3).

Dismayed by ominous military buildups in Europe, and encouraged by admirers, Jaroff and his singers decided to move their base of operations from Berlin to New York City and seek American citizenship.¹¹ The choir's popularity with the American public would prove instrumental in bringing this about. They officially came under the protection of the Department of State, which waived the continuous-residency requirement for citizenship which they could not meet due to their international touring schedules.¹² They were granted permanent resident status in 1936, and American citizenship in 1943. Immigration records show that Bolotine was



Figure 3. Returning to Europe after their triumphal tour of the United States, 1931.¹⁰

naturalized on March 8, 1943, and that his wife moved to the United States not long after the war, but there is no information concerning their son's fate.

The choir's repertoire of Russian liturgical, art, folk, and military music, all sung in Russian, was unfamiliar to most of the people who attended their concerts and bought their records. American audiences, however, as well as audiences from countless other nations, were so moved by the technical brilliance and emotional impact of their performances that unfamiliarity of both the music and the language did not matter. The ensemble appealed to a broad spectrum of the public, constantly playing to packed houses and steadily receiving rave reviews.¹³

The choir was organized into six basic sections: falsetto, first tenor, second tenor, baritone, bass, and octavist, and Jaroff featured soloists from all of them

in his concerts and recordings. Bolotine was often the featured falsettist, and when soloists were identified in U.S. programs, reviewers often mentioned him by name among those they praised.

It was a trademark of the Don Cossacks to dress in austere military uniforms and perform in strict military style formation, standing in parallel rows or arcs. Treating his choir as a unit in which every member mattered, Jaroff did not allow his soloists to step forward or take bows. Even with such restrictions, however, they moved their audiences very effectively both musically and otherwise. One reviewer remarked that Bolotine, with his facial expressions, seemed to express the feelings of a song more than the others, and that he held everyone's attention.¹⁴ However, most Americans could neither pronounce nor remember the names of any of the soloists. Bolotine was once praised only as

“the amiable Cossack who commands that eerie but exquisite falsetto.”¹⁵

Without Bolotine’s recorded legacy, the praise he received would merely be historic information. However, many recordings and also many clips from the full length feature films and TV specials the choir made in Germany in the 1950s and 1960s¹⁶ keep his artistry very much alive today. Several of the choir’s finest recordings, which date from the late 1940s to the middle 1950s, provide us with remarkable examples.

Bolotine was a soloist in their recording of the Russian Orthodox Divine Liturgy (1948–1952), an album originally conceived for the edification of Orthodox émigrés who were unable to attend services.¹⁷ He was the soloist in their iconic recordings of the Russian traditional songs “Odnovuchno gremit kolokolchik” (Monotonously rings the little bell) and “Krasni sarafan” (The red sarafan), which were initially issued as singles by Deutsche Grammophon Gesellschaft in the early- and mid-1950s. They have been reissued on many of the choir’s compilation albums ever since,¹⁸ some as recently as 2020,¹⁹ and they bring Bolotine’s artistry compellingly to life.

These recordings are now readily accessible on streaming audio databases such as Spotify and Naxos Music Library, and also on YouTube, which provides examples from both audio and video sources. One upload of “Odnovuchno gremit kolokolchik,” under its German title “Eintönig klingt hell das Glöcklein,” has had well over 2,400,000 views as of July, 2021.²⁰ However, Bolotine is not credited as soloist there or on other uploads of the song. Comments on YouTube indicate that many people who love and are deeply moved by this performance have no idea who the soloist was.

Jaroff’s innovation in using falsettists had always attracted attention. He discussed falsetto singing in a rare interview he granted for *The Etude Music Magazine* in 1943. He stated that Russians accepted the use of the falsetto as a legitimate part of their vocal ensembles. He described the ideal falsetto: “There is no ‘trick’ about the legitimate use of the falsetto. Although almost any true tenor voice can encompass it, falsetto is best attempted by an organ which is very light and lyric by nature. Its use must be based on perfect voice placement and depends entirely upon head resonance. One often hears it said that frequent use of falsetto ‘ruins’ the voice. This is not

so. In our group there are lyric tenors who have taken the falsetto part for twenty-three years and are still ‘going strong’. The danger of the falsetto is—like everything else in vocal work—its forcing or abuse . . . No one without a perfect command of head resonance should attempt it.”²¹



Figure 4. Bolotine ca. age 72.²⁵

Although he did not mention Bolotine, Jaroff was likely thinking of him when he made those statements. He was one of the lyric tenors who had taken the falsetto part in the choir for twenty-three years, and his recorded legacy reveals that he was a superb exponent of Jaroff’s ideal. He possessed the perfectly placed light and lyric head voice that Jaroff described, with a timbre that was strikingly beautiful. Not surprisingly, as a member of a choir that was famous for what the critics described as technical perfection, his vocal technique was impeccable. He moved seamlessly throughout his range, which extended from just below C₄ to F₅, without perceptible breaks. His performances were memorable and deeply moving as he brought Jaroff’s extremely expressive and exacting direction to life.²²

In addition to vocal artistry, Bolotine contributed comedic talent to the ensemble. Behind the Don Cossacks austere military façade, they were consummate showmen, not only in their serious selections, but also in their lighthearted selections. In certain raucous Cossack songs, Bolotine provided comic relief with special effects such as loud whistling and high pitched screams and laughter.²³

Bolotine’s vocal longevity was remarkable. He was featured prominently in several of the choir’s German TV specials in the 1960s. A review of one of the choir’s concerts in 1967, when he was 72 years old (Figure 4), praised him for his stratospheric and versatile instrument, noting that he hit a high F twice during the evening.²⁴ However, he apparently retired from singing soon after. He was featured on the choir’s last album, a recording of a live concert from 1970, but no later performances have come to light. His death certificate, which is available on Ancestry.com, reports that he died in Richmond, Maine, on January 1, 1981. At the time the

tiny town was an enclave for Russian émigré retirees. His wife Ksenia died in a nearby town only three months later. Unfortunately, it seems that no further record of the Bolotines' life in Maine survives.²⁶

Basile Bolotine's artistic legacy with Jaroff's Don Cossacks still awaits recognition and scholarly attention. One ardent fan who first became intensely interested in the choir upon hearing his recording of "Odnovuchno gremit kolokolchik" was Wanja Hlibka, who now conducts the Don Cossacks' official successor choir in Germany.²⁷ The continuing success of Hlibka's choir is one more way that Bolotine's influence is having a far-reaching effect. His recorded and filmed legacy offers rich source material for scholars and practitioners studying countertenor technique and the historic role of countertenors in classical music. It also offers a treasure trove of remarkable classical vocal music.

NOTES

1. Irina Minsky and her Don Cossack Choir study group at the University of Groningen, *Vierzig Don Kosaken erobern die Welt; Don Kosaken Chor Serge Jaroff 1921–2015* (Groningen: Nederland- Rusland Centrum, 2015), 28–29.
2. "Don Cossack Choristers Were Once Ragged Soldiers," *New York Times*, September 14, 1924, X8 documents the efforts of Dutch League of Nations diplomat Baron van der Hoeven on their behalf as they continued to sing but suffered life-threatening hardships in Bulgaria.
3. A review, "Der Kirchenchor der Donkosaken in Wien," *Neues Wiener Tageblatt*, July 7, 1923, says they performed wonderfully, and that Jaroff conducted in a highly original manner. An image of the review is on this site: https://www.russian-records.com/details.php?image_id=46676
4. This image courtesy of Yuri Bernikov, proprietor, russian-records.com
5. Irina Minsky, on *the Don Cossack Choir Serge Jaroff 1921–2013* album (Slava SL0400) reissued this recording, dating it 1930.
6. Courtesy of Yuri Bernikov, russian-records.com
7. Since he eventually became an American citizen, his immigration records on Ancestry.com provide this and other basic information.
8. "Russian Gives Neptune Talks," *Asbury Park Press*, Monday, May 19, 1941, 13.
9. In 1928 he was the soloist in a recording of "The Red Sarafan" by Andrei Scholuch's Ural Cossack Choir. Bolotine is singing tenor rather than falsetto. A sound file of the recording is at https://www.russian-records.com/details.php?image_id=13889 accessed July 14, 2021
10. This image provided by the Bibliothèque nationale de France with the statement "Rights: Public domain" at <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k7931649/f5.item> accessed July 14, 2021
11. "Don Cossack Chorus on Concert League Program," *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, October 7, 1938, 12.
12. "Famous Russians to Sing in San Jose Sunday," *Spartan Daily*, October 15, 1936, 1.
13. Alfred Burke, "Don Cossack Chorus Packs the Auditorium," *Lowell Sun*, April 4, 1960, 27 is a typical example of a review that documents this.
14. In "Famous Don Cossack Chorus in Coast Appearance," *Tammy Howl*, [newsletter from Gulf Park College for Women], 14:3, 19, December 15, 1939 the reviewer says "Each man has an outstanding characteristic by which he is known. One, a very high soprano, named Basile Bolotive [sic] seemed to express the feelings of a song a bit more than the others. 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."
15. Richard S. Davis, "Cossacks Sing and Fill Pabst; Jaroff Again Directs," *Milwaukee Journal*, January 25, 1949, 17.
16. The 1956 German feature film in which the Don Cossacks appeared prominently is on YouTube in its entirety, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PraElBYrrJs&t=111s> accessed July 14, 2021 Lengthy excerpts from their German TV specials in the 1960s are on YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XhRFvOvxjew&t=755s> accessed July 14, 2021 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h0TImWqVI_c&t=213s accessed July 14, 2021 The DVD produced by Irina Minsky, *Don Cossack Choir; Serge Jaroff*. Zwolle: Slava Z0003-DVD, 2012, consists of excerpts from the TV specials.
17. Ivan Assur, 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 accessed July 14, 2021 A reissue, *Divine Liturgy and Requiem Mass*. Slava SL 1003. CD, streaming audio, 2012, is available on Naxos Music Library and Spotify.
18. Recent examples include *Schwarze Augen*, Don Kosaken Chor Serge Jaroff, "Eintönig klingt hell das Glöcklein," Deutsche Grammophon 00028947949053, issued on March 5, 2015 and *Les Cosaques du Don, Chants russes populaires & religieux*, "Der rote Sarafan," Deutsche Grammophon 00028947927914, issued on January 1, 2014.

19. *Don Kosaken Chor Great Recordings*, DGG/UMG Recordings, Inc. was issued on September, 2020.
20. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E-FdNrYYDuM> accessed July 14, 2021
21. Steven West and Wassilj Flustikoff, "The Original Don Cossacks and the Music of the Don, an Interview with Serge Jaroff," *Etude* LXI: no. 11 (November, 1943): 758.
22. As an example of the impression Bolotine made, a commentator on YouTube posted a vivid remembrance of Bolotine's remarkable performances at two Don Cossack concerts he attended in Chicago in 1952.
23. A good example is the song "Himbeerernte" (in praise of raspberries), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W0YNR4OT3EU> accessed July 14, 2021
24. Warren Hauger, "Cossacks in First of Two Appearances," *Los Angeles Times*, April 29, 1967, 19.
25. Courtesy of Yuri Bernikov, russian-records.com
26. A query to the priest at the town's only remaining Orthodox church bore no fruit. His church has no parish records, and he was unable to find any information about Bolotine through other channels.
27. Anna Landefeld-Haamann, "Deutsch-russisches Märchen," *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, May 6, 2015. <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/muenchen/fuerstenfeldbruck/emmering-deutsch-russisches-maerchen-1.2468449> accessed July 14, 2021

Donna Arnold, PhD, is the long-time music reference librarian at the University of North Texas Music Library. In this large music research library, she enjoys answering questions on a wide range of subjects for faculty, student, national, and international patrons. She earned her PhD in musicology at the University of North Texas, and her master's degree in library and information studies at Texas Woman's University. She serves on the editorial board of the Taylor & Francis journal, *Music Reference Services Quarterly*. She is an active scholar who has published in the field of librarianship as well as music, and is an experienced choral singer.

Her diverse research interests include the role of traditional and online resources in academic libraries, seventeenth century lute music, Schubert studies, Americana music, the Great American Songbook, and Russian choral music. Her current research and latest publications concern Serge Jaroff and his Don Cossack Choir. Her article detailing the history of the choir, "Serge Jaroff and His Don Cossack Choir: The Refugees Who Took the World by Storm," was published in the spring 2020 issue of *The Choral Scholar & American Choral Review*.