

SERGE JAROFF AND HIS DON COSSACK CHOIR: TWO RARE SCORES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS MUSIC LIBRARY

Donna Arnold, Texas Music Library Association, Austin, October 17, 2015

PROLOGUE:

Once upon a time, I bought a record—as I was often wont to do in the glory days of LPs. I was on a world music initiative just then, and I must say that I was formidable at spotting the good stuff. On that particular occasion I went to a record store, and happened upon an LP of Serge Jaroff and his Don Cossack Choir. I had never even heard of them, but the record jacket included informative notes—as a record jacket usually would. When I learned that they were a famous Russian émigré choir, I was intrigued, so I decided to give them a try. I made a good decision.

As I learned much later, Serge Jaroff’s Don Cossack Choir was once reputed to be the best choir in the world. It gained that reputation both from its technical brilliance and the profound emotional impact of its performances. Given that it attained such a status, its origins seem all the more unlikely.

It was founded in 1921, in an attempt to raise morale at a miserable Turkish concentration camp, where disease and death ran rampant. It drew its singers from Cossack regiments of the Don River region. Coming from a tradition of serving as the Tsar’s defenders, they had been part of the White Army that was defeated by the Red Army in the wake of the Russian Revolution. After fleeing Russia for dear life on a convoy of ships, they were detained for many months under horrific conditions. Many of them did not live through the ordeal.

Serge Jaroff, one of the detainees, was ordered to conduct the choir. This was because he had been educated at a famous choir school, which was run by the Moscow Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church. He was said to be the only professional musician at the camp. Even so, he had good material to work with, for in addition to being known for their great military prowess, the Cossacks were also known for their great love of singing. Nevertheless, what transpired is well-nigh incredible.

Arranging their repertoire from memory, Jaroff transformed thirty-six promising amateurs into a brilliant world-class ensemble. Once liberated, they began a professional career at Vienna's Hofburg Palace on

July 4, 1923, and would go on to concertize world-wide with unimaginable long-term success. They always dressed in the same kind of austere Cossack uniforms they were wearing at that first concert, when those were the only clothes they had, and the audiences loved it. Banished from Russia forever, the whole choir was collectively without a country for 22 years, but with help from a U.S. senator who was an ardent fan, its members attained U.S. citizenship in 1943. Bolstered by new recruits, who were usually exiled opera singers, the choir flourished until Jaroff's retirement in 1979.

Jaroff's concerts, all sung in Russian, were difficult to classify by genre. They featured his intricate arrangements of Russian Orthodox liturgical music, art songs, folk songs, and Cossack military songs. Six- or seven-part harmony was typical. Every concert began with Russian Orthodox liturgical music, which, in Jaroff's view, could not possibly be separated from the rest of Russia's musical heritage. The folk and military pieces retained many authentic folk elements, but they were arranged as art music. Although audiences may not always have known it, they were in fact experiencing classical music.

Superb octavists—those Russian basses who sing at least an octave lower than all other basses—and superb falsettists—we would call them countertenors—defined the choir's signature sonority. The use of falsettists enabled the choir to perform a much more diverse repertoire than would otherwise have been possible. A very good example of their signature sonority is a ca. 1950 recording of Nikolai Kedroff, Jr.'s setting of the Lord's Prayer.

Jaroff's very restrained but demanding conducting style, which evoked extremely expressive rubatos and dynamic changes, became legendary. Its emotional impact rendered language barriers irrelevant. When the choir first toured America in 1930, the choral community was enthralled by the brilliance of their technique, and learned much from observing them.

Numerous film clips that show Jaroff conducting at various phases of his career demonstrate that his style changed little over the years. He maintained strict control of his choir with minimal hand gestures that were scarcely visible to audiences, and enhanced them with subtle facial expressions. This first example is from the 1930s. [Kol slaven] The second is from 1956.

[Odnovuchno gremit kolokolchik] The singers, who always memorized all of their music, knew to watch his every move. The effects they achieved with his relentless attention to detail were stunning.

In the course of its existence, the choir gave over 10,000 concerts in countries all over the world. The only places they could not go were Russia and the Eastern Bloc countries. They sang for everyone from emperors and kings to ordinary citizens in small towns, holding forth in venues as grand as Buckingham Palace or as modest as a high school auditorium. They constantly played to sold-out houses, and sold millions of records. Ardent fans, some of whom are world-class discographers, have amassed vast collections of their recordings, encompassing formats from 78s to CDs.

Fast forward to the 21st century. I had not thought of Serge Jaroff for some time, but then I ran across a New York Times story that really caught my attention. It read rather like a spy novel. Jaroff had died in 1985 and his wife had died in 1997; in 2007, whoever was supposed to be taking care of his small house in New Jersey abandoned his personal effects. A shady antiques dealer came along and saw part of them in a dumpster outside the house. Perceiving a windfall, she went dumpster diving and took many of the items home.

Enter two musicologists, a Russian, Dr. Svetlana Zvereva, and her Scottish husband, Dr. Stuart Campbell. As I understand it, they came from Europe to try to help with this crisis. The dealer gave them a number of items to take to Russia for donation to a museum. Then after they left, she realized how monetarily valuable said items must be, accused them of stealing them, and called the police. Officers in at least two countries were involved in the investigation. The musicologists, who donated what they received to Moscow's Glinka Museum of Musical Culture, were exonerated.

If in fact there was wrongdoing, the most likely suspect was probably the shady antiques dealer herself. Interestingly enough, well before this debacle, she had a police record. For years she has reportedly been selling a steady stream of Jaroff's belongings on e-bay. On the other hand, if she had not come along, perhaps everything would have been lost. Whatever the case, someone probably stole many important items from that house, and many more were probably thrown into the trash, which is indeed a real tragedy.

For years there has been an officially-sanctioned successor choir, called the Don Cossack Choir Serge Jaroff, which strives to carry on Jaroff's tradition. Its conductor, Wanja Hlibka, was the youngest soloist in Jaroff's choir during its latter years. He was said to have come to New Jersey at some point to rescue Jaroff's choral library and take it to Germany, where his choir is based. Reports of this are very sketchy, however.

When I read the New York Times story, it disturbed me very much. As a librarian who champions preservation, I was dismayed that anyone's *Nachlass* was treated in such a manner. I was particularly dismayed that such a thing happened to someone whose music I always loved, so I began to do research. In the process, I encountered much of the choir's music that was previously unknown to me, and I was astounded by what I heard. I confess that it had a profound effect on me, and that it has inspired me to join the ranks of their extreme fans.

As I began to search extensively online, I checked our catalogs to see if we had any relevant sources in our collections. As expected, I found that we have records, but I doubted that we would have anything else. Thus, I was surprised that we have two rare scores of Jaroff's arrangements of Russian folk and traditional songs; each contains nine songs, six of them appearing in both sets. They were published in 1927 and 1938 under the auspices of the choir. A WorldCat search shows that very few libraries in the world hold copies of them.

I was curious to know if this well-travelled choir had ever performed in Denton, so I checked newspaper and campus archival sources. I found that they gave concerts at North Texas State Teacher's College, now the University of North Texas, in 1935, 1939, and 1946. Jaroff's autograph on the 1938 score suggests that we may have obtained it, if not both scores, when he was in town.

Jaroff arranged almost all of the choir's music himself, and he had hundreds of arrangements to his credit, but a few pieces always were special favorites. He arranged them early on and kept using them, with only minor

modifications, for the rest of the choir's existence. Since he and the choir were treated like pop stars who must perform their top hits or face fan outrage, virtually every concert and every LP compilation included at least some of them. The scores in UNT's collection contain the main body of them. *Ej euchnjem*—the Volga Boat Song, *Ochi chornyye*—Dark Eyes, *Odnovuchno gremit kolokolchik*—Monotonously Rings the Little Bell, and *Krachnyi sarafan*—The Red Sarafan, are particularly famous. Thanks to YouTubers, dozens of records and film clips of them are readily accessible now.

Since the strictly-disciplined group constantly responded to slight nuances of Jaroff's minimalist gestures, the unwritten performance practice in his interpretations was paramount. Tempo rubato and constant, dramatic dynamic changes were the norm. He would typically interpret a piece a little differently from one concert to the next, surprising the fans by calling for pianissimo in a passage where they expected fortissimo. Critics periodically faulted him for his excessive tempo and dynamic changes, but his style never ceased to electrify audiences.

Because his performance practice was so important, seeing Jaroff's arrangements in print is revealing. The scores in our collection show how the detailed effects that made the music so compelling defy notation in these cases, for tempo and dynamic markings are minimal and in no wise convey how complex his interpretations actually were. These scores are only skeletons of the richly-varied musical momentum that Jaroff built. Whether this is the case for many of his other arrangements is an open question.

Even without the minute details, however, Jaroff's arrangements constitute a rich treasure. It would be very valuable if study scores and performance scores of all of them were readily available, but currently they are not. The situation is especially complicated because the successor choir would understandably have a proprietary interest in withholding them from publication, if it owns exclusive rights to them, which it most likely does.

If any individual pieces were ever commercially published as performance scores, none of them are listed on WorldCat or anywhere else that I have

searched. Presently I know of only two Jaroff arrangements that other choirs have recorded. I do not know whether anyone has undertaken the project of using computer technology to harvest scores of Jaroff's arrangements from recordings. No telling what may have taken place in Russia, for copies of Jaroff's recordings had been smuggled in and passed around among choral cognoscenti well before the fall of the Soviet Union. Like me, they were astounded by what they heard.

Here is a somewhat bizarre postscript. When Jaroff and his choir began their professional career in 1923, they became an instant sensation and were very soon world-famous. Copycat Cossack choirs sprang up almost immediately, some becoming very successful. Virtually every one of them was imitating Jaroff's group, albeit without the benefit of his musical genius.

Strangely enough, Cossack choirs still proliferate in Germany, a country in which the Jaroff choir was particularly popular and is still greatly loved. Wanja Hlibka's successor choir is of course reaping the benefits of that love. They have considerable competition, however, both from German groups and from Cossack choirs that have sprung up in Russia after the fall of the Soviet Union. Although some of them are quite good, none performs at the level of Jaroff's original ensemble, which, as a recent authority stated, was unrivalled.

Jaroff's Don Cossacks have been described as one of the best-known but least-researched musical ensembles in the world. Despite the fact that they flourished for almost sixty years and received massive publicity and press coverage, very little serious research was ever devoted to them until recently. Perhaps because of their great popularity, members of the classical music establishment tended to write them off without really listening carefully to them or understanding the depth of their work. A notable exception was Sergei Rachmaninoff, who mentored Jaroff early on and always championed the choir. They made several superb recordings of his sacred music.

The Jaroff's choir's greatest achievement was arguably interpretations of extensive excerpts from the liturgy of the Russian Orthodox Church. They recorded this music with the participation of clergy, for reportedly, a wealthy Russian nobleman sponsored the endeavor for the benefit of émigrés of the

Russian Orthodox faith who lived so far from churches that they were unable to attend worship services. Classical music practitioners who overlooked Jaroff's achievements likely never even knew that these recordings existed.

Because of the already-described donation by the musicologists, important Jaroff research material is now available at the publicly-accessible archive of the Glinka Museum of Musical Culture in Moscow. Further important material is housed at the Minsky Archive in Zwolle, a city in the Netherlands. It was founded by Irina Minsky, widow of distinguished baritone Michael Minsky, who was a long-time soloist in the Jaroff choir. Recently, in-depth research has taken place at both those locations. Important work has also been done by private collectors, especially in the area of discography. Results of their impressive efforts can be seen on the website Russian-records.com.

Here in the United States, which was, after all, Jaroff and the choir's adopted country, there seem to be few relevant resources, and little research has been done. Unlike in Germany, interest in the Cossack choir phenomenon waned here once they stopped touring. Research opportunities abound, for the lacunae are many, and there is much that can be studied even without access to the distant archives. In view of the tragedy in New Jersey and the scarcity of material, the UNT Music Library's holdings, however modest, take on a special significance.