

Come, Sing and Conquer: The Don Cossack Choir Australian concert tour of 1926.

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To Australian patrons of the performing arts the year 1926 might have seemed like 'The Year of the Russians', as it was during this time they were able to see ballerina Anna Pavlova and her company, the operatic bass Feodor Chaliapin and also, overlapping with the Pavlova tour, the Don Cossack Choir, an ensemble of thirty-six male singers led by its founder and conductor Serge Jaroff. For the choir, the Australian tour represented the breaking of new ground, its first venture beyond the United Kingdom and mainland Europe where its reputation had been established. The visit was also to become a significant one in the choir's history, because the time spent in Australia influenced several founding members to leave the ensemble and to return to these shores to settle. Of these, most took up residence in the Sydney area, and today the Don Cossack Choir heritage lives on in over sixty descendants throughout Australia.

The tour was arranged by entrepreneur Edward John (E.J.) Carroll, who had previously brought to Australian audiences the Sistine Choir and the violinist Fritz Kriesler. Photographs were taken at the various stages of the itinerary, as had been the practice since the choir's professional debut in 1923, and these together with concert reviews and other press items provide a valuable record of the choir's movements and activities. For the viewpoint of the visiting artists, a number of insights can be drawn from a diary kept by one of the choristers, Pavel (Paul) Molchanoff, and some of Jaroff's impressions were recorded by Emilian Klinski in his memoir of the choir's early years.¹

The first concerts took place at the Adelaide Town Hall on 10, 12 and 13 April. 'Adelaide has never before heard anything like the famous Don Cossack male choir. It is unique....', stated a review in the *Advertiser* after the opening concert.² Despite the praise Jaroff's own concern early in the tour was that the 'European' program would not suite the tastes of local audiences, the 'quiet and proper' people he likened to Londoners.³ Present in the audience on the opening night was the Governor of South Australia, Sir Thomas Bridges and Lady Bridges, to whom Jaroff was later presented. In his patronage of the choir Sir Thomas was following the example of his superior, King George V, for whom the Don Cossacks had performed the previous year.⁴

The Melbourne season followed, with six performances from 17 to 13 April at the Auditorium. Critic Thorold Waters wrote in the *Sun News-Pictorial*: 'Nobody who is a choral singer himself can afford to miss hearing the consummate beauty of their infinite gentleness, the rounded nobility of their great tones, or the next to barbaric splendour with which they can spread a big vocal range.'⁵ It is not difficult to imagine the excitement the group may have created, off-stage as well as on: a fine looking troupe of young men, very Russian in their high-collared tunics and shining knee-length boots, and who sang like angels. The *Sun News-Pictorial* also reported that E. J. Carroll had been 'inundated' with offers of horses for the visitors' use.⁶ Evidently a romantic image of the Cossack-horseman had lodged in the public imagination.. Little is known about the choristers' leisure time and social activities at this time, one exception being an occasion

when some were entertained by Russian-born Melbourne businessman Nissen Leonard- Kanevsky. The visit was immortalised in a charming photograph which shows several Don Cossacks in playful attitudes together with Kanevsky and family members.⁷

The next concerts were in Queensland from 4 to 12 May. Four performances were given at the Brisbane Exhibition Hall and one each at Toowoomba's Empire Theatre and the Wintergarden, Ipswich. The cluster of engagements in that state reflected the concentration of Russian immigrants in Queensland in the earlier part of the twentieth century.⁸ The diary kept by tenor Paul Molchanoff throughout his singing career throws some light on the tempo of travel in that era -- the train journey from Brisbane to Sydney took over twenty-four hours.⁹ The ensemble arrived at Sydney's Central Station on 14 May to be met by some of the Russian immigrant community with a ceremonial offering of bread and salt, the traditional Russian welcome to honoured guests. A photograph of the occasion appeared the next day in the *Daily Telegraph*.¹⁰

The Sydney season constituted the major part of the tour, with twenty-two concerts from 15 May to 2 June, at the Sydney Town Hall. On 22 May the evening performance was attended by the Governor-General Lord Stonehaven and Lady Stonehaven, and in honour of the vice-regal presence the choir opened the program with a rendition of 'God Save the King' sung in Russian.¹¹ Two days later the *Sydney Mail* reported an incident that made one performance particularly memorable -- the Town Hall's lights failed mid-performance. The choir sang on in complete darkness, never missing a beat, until lighting was restored. The applause that followed this feat can only be imagined.

By a remarkable coincidence, the item previous to the electrical mishap had been Alexander Kastalsky's 'Holy Light', a hymn praising the beauty of light.¹² Soon after the opening of the Sydney season, the *Daily Telegraph* ran an advertisement in the entertainments section, proclaiming: 'The Don Cossacks -- They came! They sang! They conquered!'¹³ The acclaim the choir had received during the tour would appear to justify that triumphant statement, and there were several factors that lent particular distinction to their performances. One was the singers' appearance and style of stage presentation: clad in severe dark uniforms and knee-high boots, their precise and synchronised entry onstage and their disciplined stance clearly attested to their recent military experience. A *Brisbane Courier* review likened them to '.....a platoon of Guardsmen, suddenly gifted with amazing vocal powers.....'¹⁴ There was a certain fascination in seeing the diminutive Jaroff, the smallest man of the ensemble, exerting his complete onstage mastery over his taller brethren. His unique style of conducting was barely visible to the audience; hands held close to the chest, directions given with little more than finger movements, an arm extended perhaps only to draw forth a mighty *crescendo*. Another factor was the program content, the first part of each performance being devoted to sacred music -- or more specifically, the music of the Russian Orthodox Church. The Russian style of church singing, with its rich harmonies and a *capella* rendition, was an ideal vehicle for the choir's experience and vocal range -- from fluting counter-tenors to sonorous basses -- and entirely appropriate to the talents of Jaroff, whose musical training had been at the Moscow Synodal School.¹⁵ This style constitutes a splendid example of the power of the human voice to evoke emotional as well as spiritual response, and may have been something of a revelation for audiences perhaps more familiar with the orchestrated religious works of western European composers, or with austere Gregorian chant. The words of the reporter for the magazine *The Home* suggest such

an experience: '.....I was stirred with such an emotion as I have never felt before it was entirely different from anything I had supposed it possible for music to convey.'¹⁶

Despite the intense schedule of performances, remaining in one location for the duration of the Sydney season allowed choir members some time to look about the city and its surrounds and to socialise. Molchanoff describes a visit made by several members to the Rouse Hill farm of Christopher Owie, poultry farmer and former colonel of the Russian Imperial Guard. He refers to Owie as 'the colonel', makes note of the modest home and the delicious Russian-style lunch they enjoyed there ('borsch and pie'), and more: '.....when I saw the hens, and felt the comfortable ambience there, I was almost off my head got home late, with much to think about.'¹⁷ Almost certainly the seed of an idea was sown that day, that resulted in Molchanoff himself becoming a poultry farmer a few years later. However, the first choir member to buy a property in Australia appears to have been Pyotr (Peter) Golliffe, who took up a farm in Cranstons Road, Middle Dural. A 1926 photograph shows a group standing before the stone farmhouse with a proprietorial air that suggests the purchase of the property had been initiated.¹⁸ By 1930, Golliffe's neighbours along Cranstons Road would include two more ex-choristers, one of them being the diarist Molchanoff.

The Australian tour concluded with four concerts at Newcastle's Central Hall on 3, 4, and 5 June, after which the choir sailed from Sydney to New Zealand for a further concert tour. A little more than a month after leaving Australia the main body of the choir embarked for England via the Panama Canal, while Golliffe and three others stayed behind. Within days these four returned to Sydney, becoming the pioneers of the group. Three more members emigrated separately in 1927 and '28, and another four travelled together in 1930.¹⁹ Relinquishing the glamorous but nomadic life of the professional entertainer, most turned to farming -- some temporarily, others for the rest of their lives. They were men of a generation many of whom had gone into the army straight from school, and lack of vocational experience as well as language difficulties left them with few prospects other than manual labour. Klinski gave their situation a romantic gloss, writing: 'The cossacks are drawn back to the land.'²⁰

It would be thirty years, in 1956, before Australian audiences would again see the Don Cossack Choir; thirty years before Jaroff and his singers (American citizens by the time) would meet again their old colleagues who had become Australians.

¹ Emilian Klinski, *Sergei Zharov i ego Donskoi Kosaken Khor* (*Serge Jaroff and his Don Cossack Choir*), Emilian Klinski, Berlin, 1931.

² 'Cossack Singers', *The Advertiser*, 12 April 1926, p. 17.

³ Klinski, p. 38; English translation A. Kamaralli, 2001.

⁴ *Programme; The Don Cossacks*, Windsor Castle, 23 June 1925.

⁵ Thorold Waters, 'Success of Don Cossack Choir', *Sun News-Pictorial*, 19 April, 1926, p.29.

⁶ 'Soldiers' Choir', *Sun News-Pictorial*, 17 April 1926, p. 17.

⁷ Photograph ID no. DCC/A71.

⁸ Boris Christa, 'Russians', in J. Jupp (ed.), *The Australian People; An encyclopedia of the nation, its people and their origins*, Angus and Robertson, North Ryde, NSW, 1988, p. 753.

⁹ Paul Molchanoff, *Diary, 1926*, entries 13-14 May 1926; English translation, A. Kamaralli, 2001.

¹⁰ *Daily Telegraph*, 15 May 1926, p. 2.

¹¹ 'Don Cossacks', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 May 1926, p. 3.

¹² 'Artistic Choral Singing', *Sydney Mail*, 26 May 1926, p. 15.

¹³ *Daily Telegraph*, 17 May 1926, p. 13.

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- ¹⁴ 'The Cossack Choir', *Brisbane Courier*, 5 May 1926, p. 22.
¹⁵ Svetlana Zvereva, *Alexander Kastalsky; His life and music*; translation Stuart Campbell, Aldgate Publishing, Aldershot, UK, 2003, p. 190.
¹⁶ 'The Don Cossack Choir', *The Home*, 1 May 1926, p. 17.
¹⁷ Molchanoff, entry 30 May 1926.
¹⁸ Photograph ID no. DCC/B30.
¹⁹ Archives New Zealand, ref. no. 551/771/9; *Ruahini*, dep. Wellington 17 July 1926.
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NAA, A440, 1952/12/4548, naturalisation file, P. Fedoroff.
²⁰ Klinski, p.40.

Note: Observations regarding the appearance and artistic style of Jaroff and his choir are the author's own.

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