

*The* **DON COSSACK**  
*Chorus & Dancers of America*

GEORGE MARGITICH, *Conductor*



**LIVE IN CONCERT**

*"The Legend Continues..."*

## ABOUT THE CHORUS

The solemn beauty of a psalm sung to music written one thousand years ago. The power of Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture, produced by the harmony of twenty-four male voices. The boisterous energy of a Cossack warrior chant. The nostalgia of poignant Russian love songs and folk dances. Under the dynamic direction of George Margitich a glorious spectrum of Russia's musical tradition is revealed.

Commanding in black tunics and dark blue trousers accented by red stripes, the Don Cossacks stride on stage to give voice as an awesome accapella orchestra. Celestial tenor lines and bass notes rising out of a bottomless abyss span four and a half octaves. From the profound opening hymn through the raucous, fast-paced dance numbers, the fervor and exuberance of their ensemble thrills.

Conductor Margitich is the protege of Serge Jaroff, original founder of the Don Cossack Chorus in 1923 (see HISTORY OF THE DON COSSACK CHORUS). As an extension of his friendship and respect for Margitich's abilities, Jaroff granted him the title of his world famous chorus and presented him with the full collection of his own choral arrangements, unique in orchestral dimension and style. Jaroff's Don Cossack Chorus was the longest international performing group in the history of theater.

### HISTORY OF THE DON COSSACK CHORUS

*"If we must die, let's die singing."*

The original Don Cossack Chorus, founded by Serge Jaroff, literally sprang from the ancient warriors' maxim, "If we must die, let's die singing."

Following the 1917 Revolution, Cossack troops from the Don region, fighting in the Crimea during the Russian civil war, were captured and interred at Tchelengir, the allied "death camp" near Constantinople. They subsisted on starvation rations while cholera swept the compound. Their number dwindled daily. At night they gathered around a campfire for the solace of companionship in song.

For the duration of their interment, song was freedom, a return to life in their villages, the open steppes, to loved ones they never thought to see again. They sang in defiance of danger and death. As Cossacks have always sung, not with their vocal chords, but with the blood of their soul. Men lying in their midst, too weak to stand found strength to cry hymns, voicing their faith in eternity. Death seemed the only sure exit from Tchelengir, heaven the only hope.

Among the Cossacks in this lice infested, plague decimated chorus of the doomed, was a four foot, ten inch officer, Serge Jaroff. The men know him as the leader of a machine gun unit, but before the Revolution, Jaroff had trained at the Moscow Synod of Choral Singing. There he studied with the musical giants of the day - Tchaikovsky, Smolensky, Tchesnokov as well as Danilov - and toured Europe as a soloist with the Synod Chorus.

At eighteen, Jaroff was prepared to conduct, but Synod officials felt his childlike appearance made his appointment to a major liturgical choir unseemly. He was sent to direct a group of disabled soldiers and sailors under the patronage of the Czarina's sister, the Grand Duchess Elizabeth.

The physique that was a temporary career handicap was Jaroff's salvation in Bolshevik captivity. After a battle with General Abramov's Cossacks, Red Army soldiers commenced a massacre. They stripped and threw members of Jaroff's regiment to the ground, slaughtering at random. One pulled Jaroff from the mass and raised his sabre. Another soldier blocked the stroke, crying-"don't touch the kid!".

So "the kid" survived, to stand among the gaunt Cossacks at Tchelengir. Jaroff spoke of that time as the bleakest period of the Don Cossacks exile. "Isolated from the entire world, hunger, and fear of the epidemic overshadowed any hope for better days. But another hope - a belief in divine justice - was growing day by day. I sensed a religious revival all around."

An opportunity to voice his faith beyond the campfire circle came to Jaroff and his men. Hoping to raise the morale of all the troops in the compound, the Division Commander asked the Don Cossacks to sing Bortniansky's Te Deum for the solemn St. Nicholas Day Mass. Jaroff wrote down the musical parts on scraps of paper and passed them among the Cossacks with the finest natural voices.

The Mass, celebrated on December 19, 1921 marked the beginning of the Don Cossack Chorus.

The singers who came together for that religious service began to meet regularly, offering songs from their own villages for Jaroff to arrange. The instrument he forged with their voices, ultimately described as -"an instrument of divine breath" - gave the imprisoned Cossacks joy, purpose and - literally - life.

Banned from returning to their homes, in the newly formed U.S.S.R. after their release from Tchelengir, these "Cossacks without a country" chose to remain together as a group, travelling to Bulgaria, where Tsar Boris had agreed to accept a quota of Russian refugees.

By day, The men were brute laborers in the mines and factories of Sophia. Nights they became free living Cossacks again, through song.

Jaroff's chorus began to sing publicly at the Russian Embassy church in Sophia, and at diplomatic functions. Karsavina, a famous Russian ballerina, heard them and brought the impresario Heller to one of their performances. This was the encounter that sparked the Don Cossacks' globe orbiting career.

Heller remembered Jaroff from his solo performance with the Synod Chorus in Vienna. He arranged French visas for the men and set up a tour which began in 1923 with a concert in the same Vienna hall where Jaroff sang as a boy.

Witnesses say it was "the day Europe discovered the soul of Russia."

The men arrived for their debut in the musical capitol of Europe in remnants of their uniforms, marked by their ordeal of imprisonment and hard labor. They stood - proud wraiths - before an elegantly clad audience and sang the Bortniansky Te Deum with all the grief of their exile and the hunger of their souls. A critic wrote of that performance - "The Don Cossack Singing prods the heart, tears it from the earth and exalts it to unattainable heights; the soft harmony heals the entire human being."

This ensemble evolved to a musically sophisticated unit, with Rachmaninov and other eminent Russian composers collaborating with Jaroff in his spectacular arrangements of Russian folk tunes and liturgical works. Part of what bound Jaroff's men through the decades and some nine thousand globe circling concerts, was the memory of their homeland. For the duration of every performance, Jaroff, their musical Tsar, led them back again.

Today the Don Cossack Chorus of America is conducted by Jaroff's protege, George Margitich. Jaroff, who was inducted in the Russian-American Hall of Fame in 1980, died in 1985. During the final years of his life, he attended Margitich's rehearsals and concerts, coaching him at his home and imbuing him with the knowledge and techniques of his own conducting mastery. Several members of Jaroff's original chorus continue to sing in the current ensemble, which includes an ethnic mix of immigrants from the former U.S.S.R., as well as second generation Russian Americans. Collectively the men have spent more time performing in the opera halls of Europe and the Soviet Union than riding on horseback on the steppes. Under Margitich's direction, all are united in their dedicated performance of Russian liturgical and folk music cherished and preserved by Jaroff in his lifetime.

*You don't have to be Russian to love the Don Cossacks!*



## GEORGE MARGITICH, *Conductor*

The man responsible for the rising of the Don Cossack Chorus and Dancers of America, Inc. in the tradition of Serge Jaroff was born to his vocation as a choral conductor. George Margitich received his early music training from his father, who was choirmaster at various Russian Orthodox churches.

His own gifts as a musician brought Mr. Margitich before the public in high school, during military service and at Fairleigh Dickinson University, where he earned a B.S. degree. He subsequently performed in supperclubs and on national television, as soloist in his own musical ensemble.

In 1964 Mr. Margitich first took up his role as conductor of a full male chorus. The group which evolved under his direction ultimately appeared in one hundred and fifty concerts on the east coast. The internationally acclaimed tenor Nicolai Gedda, appeared as a featured soloist with this chorus at a SRO performance at the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C. .

Mr. Margitich was instrumental in producing two recordings, conducting his chorus in *The Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom* and *Selections of Russian Sacred Music and Folk Songs*. During this period, Serge Jaroff attended Mr. Margitich's concerts and rehearsals and tutored him privately at his home, imbuing the young man with his knowledge and technique of his own conducting mastery.

Jaroff himself caught the secret of Margitich's visceral involvement with his singers. "Mr. Margitich not only uses his hands to conduct, his eyes - but also, he breathes with the chorus. Therefore he supports the strength of the singers and soloists."

A critic of the Woodstock Times wrote, "Singing along with his men full voiced, it's apparent the music Margitich conducts is his art, his life passion. The transcendent unity of the Don Cossack's great voices, raised for love of God, women and sheer joy of song strikes a primal note, unsounded by any other chorus performing in America."



George Margitich  
*Conductor*



*Credits:*

**PAT CLARK** recorded the live concert. **LARRY HAVRILIAK**, sound remastering  
**SERGE JAROFF**, arrangements of songs. **ANDREW MIKETZUK**, Assistant Conductor  
**WASSILY FLUSTIKOFF**, advisor. **CHARLES TEMKO**, Esquire  
**CAITLIN MONTGOMERY**, text writer

*Produced by Maria Droutzkoy*

**THE *Don Cossack* CHORUS & DANCERS OF AMERICA, INC.**  
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1. **GOD IS WITH US** Kastalsky, Arr. Jaroff. Soloists: Assur, Krempasky, Koniuch, Soroka, Beresoff
2. **THE LITANY and THE LORD'S PRAYER** Rimsy-Korsakov. Soloists: Kovalak, basso
3. **LORD HAVE MERCY** Lvovsky, Arr. Jaroff. Soloist: Koniuch, basso
4. **FIRST PSALM OF DAVID** Kiev Monastery Chant. Soloist: Danilchick, tenor
5. **LORD SAVE THY PEOPLE, THE 1812 OVERTURE** Tchaikovsky. Arr. Jaroff
6. **MEMORY ETERNAL** Traditional
7. **RUSSIAN DANCE** Traditional. Dancers: O'Reilly and Boyet. Miketzuk, Conducting
8. **STENKA RAZIN** Arr. Dobrowen. Intro arr. Jaroff. Soloist: Assur, baritone
9. **EVENING BELLS** Arr. Jaroff. Soloist: Danilchick, tenor
10. **VOLGA BOATMAN** Arr. Jaroff. Soloist: Beresoff, basso
11. **THE TEMPEST** Warlamoff, Arr. Jaroff. Soloist: Kazimov, tenor
12. **LESGINKA DANCE** Traditional. Dancers: O'Reilly and Boyet. Soloist: Kazimov, tenor
13. **DOWN THE PETROGRAD ROAD** Arr. Jaroff. Soloist: Savchuck, tenor
14. **MONOTONOUSLY RINGS THE COACH BELL** Arr. Jaroff. Soloists: Karaghioz, tenor
15. **GREEN GRASS & KALINKA** Warlamoff, Arr. Jaroff. Soloist: Kazimov, tenor
16. **I'M GOING DOWN BY THE RIVER and AT THE BLACKSMITH** Arr. Jaroff  
Soloist: Beresoff, basso
17. **KOL SLAVEN: HOW GREAT IN ZION** Arr. Jaroff

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