

# Boris Christoff 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

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"A great future awaits this boy," said Prof. Dobri Christoff of the little Boris, who sang in the choir of Alexander Nevsky Cathedral in Sofia. Later, Italians would call him **"the voice of our century", "the tsar of the stage, the colossus, and the greatest."** Today, 100 years after his birth, Boris Christoff is widely recognised as one of the greatest and most beautiful voices of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His anniversary is celebrated with numerous performances throughout Bulgaria and on the world's greatest opera stages: in Milan, Florence, London, Vienna, New York, etc.

Boris Christoff's father is a descendant from the Gogovcy family, great patriots from the village of Meglensko (Macedonia). In 17<sup>th</sup> century they fled to Kojuh Planina to escape a forced conversion to Islam and settled in the village of Sovitch, adopting the name Sovitchanovi. Boris was born on May 18, 1914, in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, at 8 in the morning. With his parents he arrived in Sofia, to live in his mother's birth house at 43 Tsar Samuil street.

Singing was a great part of his family. His grandfather sang in church, his uncle Georgy had a wonderful bass-baritone; his father Kiril was a beautiful tenor who recorded many songs for Radio Sofia. Boris's brother Christo also had a wonderful voice and even composed small musical pieces. Unfortunately, he died very early, but it was from him that Boris acquired the taste and love for music.

For Boris Christoff singing was passion. As a student, he played the guitar and sang Russian romances. He used to tell his classmates, "**Don't laugh, there will come the day when I'll be singing in the Metropolitan Opera.**" This never happened but for a different reason.

Boris Christoff studied law and after graduating in 1940 from the Sofia University he started a career as a magistrate. In his spare time he continued singing in the Gusla men Choir in Sofia, achieving an enormous success as soloist. He was timid and shy, but very ambitious and would not spare himself. He used to say, "**I don't want to be a mediocre artist.**"

In 1941, Gusla performed in the traditional Christmas concert at the Tsar Palace. Tsaritsa Joanna was so impressed by the voice of the young soloist that she decided to help him study singing in Italy. On May 18, 1942, his birthday, with a government grant and with his family's blessing, Boris Christoff heads to Rome, Italy. There, with help from Beniamino Gilly and Giuseppe de Luca, he was introduced to Riccardo Stracciari, famous baritone and tutor in singing, who, for two years, introduced Boris Christoff to the core Italian bass repertoire: Mefistofele, Don Basilio, Philip, Ramfis, Guardiano, as well as Leporello in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. About his student, Maestro Stracciari used to say: "**He holds impressive endowments which will secure him a world career. He belongs to the World.**"

Boris Christoff made his operatic debut as Colline in *La bohème* at Reggio di Calabria on March 12, 1946. He had a tremendous success, and had to sing the aria 3 times.

During his career Boris Christoff appeared in 64 roles in 58 operas in over 800 performances at Milan's La Scala, Venice's La Fenice, the Rome Opera, Covent Garden in London, the opera houses of Naples, Barcelona, Lisbon, Rio de Janeiro, San Francisco, etc. Among his most famous roles were those of Tsar Boris (Mussorgsky, *Boris Godunov*), Philip II (Verdi, *Don Carlo*), Mephistopheles (Gounod, *Faust*), Ivan Susanin (Glinka, *A Life for the Tsar*), Zaccaria (Verdi, *Nabucco*), Tsar Ivan (Rimsky-Korsakov, *Ivan the Terrible*), Dosifei (Mussorgsky, *Khovanshchina*), Fiesco (Verdi, *Simon Boccanegra*), Attila (Verdi, *Attila*), Padre Guardiano (Verdi, *La forza del destino*), Galitzky and Kontchak (Borodin, *Prince Igor*) and others.

During his long 41-year singing career, he worked with many famous conductors: Furtwangler, Karajan, Guy, and many others. He sang together with Renata Tebaldi, Maria Callas, Elena Nikolai, as well as with his Bulgarian colleagues: Rayna Kabaivanska, Guena Dimitrova, Nicolai Ghiaurov.

In 1950 he was invited by the famous opera impresario and director of the Metropolitan Opera Rudolf Bing to sing on the opening night as Phillip II in *Don Carlo*. Christoff was refused entry into the USA as a result of the McCarran Immigration Act, which banned citizens of the Soviet bloc, including Bulgaria, from entering the country. Despite his permanent Italian residence and the intervention of high-placed dignitaries, the immigration services would not relent. The same year, on September 6, Boris Christoff debuted as Phillip II at Rio de Janeiro's Teatro Municipal. After the restrictions were loosened, Christoff made his US operatic debut at the San Francisco Opera in 1956. He refused any further invitations by the Metropolitan and never appeared there.

Boris Christoff is mostly thought of as a performer of Verdi and Mussorgsky, but his repertoire included Mozart, Beethoven, Weber, and Wagner. Critics considered him a singer of Mozart by vocation.

For a long time, the relations between Boris Christoff and the Communist regime in Bulgaria were very tense, even hostile. He was compared to singers like Nicolai Ghiaurov, who was admired and supported by the regime, and Christoff was so despised, that he was denied entry numerous times, even for his father's funeral in 1961. After an open conflict with Ghiaurov at La Scala, whom Christoff blamed for collaborating with the Bulgarian regime, his contract with La Scala was terminated for good. It was for these reasons that Boris Christoff never sang before a live audience in his homeland Bulgaria

When asked about his favourite role, Boris Christoff replies that there are two personalities in which he finds **“a vast space for plunging deep down the human heart,”** Phillip II and Boris Godunov. The latter is considered his star role. On November 19, 1949, Boris Christoff debuted at Covent Garden as Tsar Boris in Modest Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*. The London Times reported **“the fact that Christoff sang the role in Russian was a small price to pay for such a fine interpretation.”** A later article had the headline **“Covent Garden finds a new Chaliapin.”**

Boris Christoff was much admired as a singer and recorded more than 200 Russian songs by Mussorgsky, Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Glinka, Borodin, Cui, Balakirev, as well as traditional songs. He was the first to record all of Mussorgsky's 63 songs.

In 1967, Boris Christoff was allowed to return to Bulgaria for the first time since his departure to Rome, for the funeral of his mother. Afterwards, he started visiting Bulgaria frequently, including for the famous recording of Eastern Orthodox chants in the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral. Owing to his stage presence and dramatic temperament, he was a worthy heir to the grand tradition of Slavonic basses. According to Prof. Alexander Yossifov, his great talent and his incredibly rich Bulgarian spirit allow him to express **“the hidden grief and sadness in Eastern Orthodox chanting. He taught the world how to sing Orthodox chants and Russian operas.”**

In 1986 Boris Christoff donated money to the Bulgarian state for the purchase of a building in Rome, which hosts the Boris Christoff Bulgarian Academy of Arts /Accademia di Bulgaria/. There, young Bulgarian talents, holders of a Boris Christoff Foundation bursary, work on the perfection of their singing. He also donated his house in Sofia, today the Boris Christoff Museum, to be a place for educating young opera singers and to be used as a Centre of Arts. Boris Christoff's career came to an end on June 22, 1986, with a final concert at the Accademia di Bulgaria.

He is holder of the following titles: National Artist of Bulgaria, Honoured Citizen of Sofia, Commander of the Republic of Italy, Knight Commander of the Order of St. Peter and St. Paul (Brazil) and many others.

He died in Rome on June 28, 1993, and his body was returned to Bulgaria. He was given a state funeral in the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, the place where he had first sung as a boy and where he started his conquest of the opera stages of the world.

Пресата за Борис Христов  
в ролята на цар Борис Годунов

- „Царят на Христов — образ достоен само за легендите“... Борис Христов е един гений на лиричния театър ... Това е един „Борис“, достоен да бъде описан от историците, който ще остане една легенда.” - Chicago Daily News, 18.11.1958
- „...Борис Христов е потресаващ. Не може да се мечтае за по-пълно съвършенство...” - Martine Cadieu, “Les Lettres Française”, бр.9 (24.02-02.03), 1966
- Пред възхитената и очарована публика на 22.XI.1982г. застана личност, за която древните биха казали, че е полубог. Как другояче можем да наречем един от най-големите певци на XX век? - Diapason, бр.1, 1983г.
- „И слава на цар Борис, който вече почти четиридесет години царува над обширни области от музиката и театъра, от висотата на един глас, подобен на който рядко се среща...” - Daniele Spini, Boris Godunov's Death – Chailly – Teatro Comunale di Firenze, 13, 15.12.1984

What did the Press write about Boris Christoff  
in the role of tsar Boris Godunov

- “Christoff's Tsar - an image worthy only of legends”...Boris Christoff is a genius of lyrical theater.....This is a Boris, worthy of being remembered by historians, who will remain a legend” - Chicago Daily News, 18.11.1958
- “...Boris Christoff is stunning. One couldn't dream of more complete perfection...” Martine Cadieu, “Les Lettres Française”, бр.9 (24.02-02.03), 1966
- On November 22, 1982, before the fascinated and enchanted audience, stood a personality, who the ancients would call a Demigod. How else to name one of the greatest singers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? Diapason, No.1, 1983г.
- “And glory to Tsar Boris, who nearly forty years reigns over vast fields in music and theater, from the height of a voice, whose like rarely occurs”- Daniele Spini, Boris Godunov's Death – Chailly – Teatro Comunale di Firenze, 13, 15.12.1984