

Swedish duo gives new life to Yiddish poetry

As two non-Jewish musicians celebrate the release of their Yiddish poetry album, **Danielle Goldstein** finds out what led them to the project

Since Ida Gillner was a child she's harboured a love for klezmer music and the Yiddish language. No doubt this stemmed from her parents, or from spending summers at Bnei Akiva machane (kids' camp) or the wider Jewish community? "Not at all," she laughs. "I don't have any Jewish blood in my family." So how does a secular Swedish musician end up specialising in Yiddish folk music? Perhaps the connection comes from Gillner's bandmate Louise Vase. But as my question is met with another charming chuckle I realise that the other half of Ida&Louise has no Jewish heritage either. The link in fact comes from Gillner's first saxophone teacher, whom she met aged nine.

"He wanted me to play this song and I had never heard anything like it before. It was a really traditional klezmer tune and I loved it." After that, Gillner's parents nurtured her newfound love for the genre by taking her to klezmer concerts in Gothenburg – an hour's ferry and bus from her home on the tiny island of Asperö. Fast forward to 2019 and Gillner – with Vase, of course – has just released *Shtoltse Lider* (Proud Poems), an album of poetry set to music, featuring five early 20th-century female Yiddish writers.



Ida Gillner (right) and Louise Vase (left).

Gillner and Vase met in 2009 while at a folk music conference in Finland. "It was quite funny," Gillner remembers, "because it was really late; we were in a bar where people were jamming traditional Scandinavian/Nordic folk with fiddles and Louise and I were both covering our ears." Not long after that Vase moved to Gothenburg from Denmark as an exchange student – as both were studying music in the folk and world departments of their universities – and stayed for four years. "When we started playing together," continues Gillner, "we realised we were musical soulmates."

Around the same time, Gillner tells me, she began to really investigate klezmer after a trip to the Jewish Culture Festival in Krakow. "I met a lot of musicians there who told me to go to KlezKanada in Montreal, which I did the year after. Then I moved to Berlin for half a year to study klezmer with clarinetist Christian Dawid."

It wasn't long before Gillner discovered she had a deeper relationship with the music she was studying. "When I really started to listen to Yiddish folk," she explains, "I understood so much of it. I was confused, because it's not my language, but then

I learned that Yiddish consists of 70 per cent old German and my grandmother was German. She came to Sweden as a refugee in 1945 and talked in German to me. That made me feel close to the Yiddish language."

Until now, *Ida&Louise* has released two records: one LP of original compositions and an EP of traditional klezmer and Yiddish songs. The seed for *Shtoltse Lider* was planted when Gillner received a phone call from someone they knew among Gothenburg's Jewish residents asking if the duo would like to write a piece of music for a Rokhl Korn seminar. Korn (who lived from 1898 to 1982) was a Galician Yiddish poet, who spent much of her life fleeing fascism. During these years, which Korn referred to as her "na v'nod yorn" (years of wandering), she found herself briefly in Sweden, before finally settling in Canada.

Challenge accepted; Gillner and Vase then received an anthology of Yiddish poetry, which also featured Anna Margolin, Celia Dropkin, Malka Heifetz Tussman and Kadya Molodovsky. Gillner compares the event to discovering hidden treasure. "From that moment we knew we wanted to make something more of it. The fact that they were female poets and active before World War II is really interesting. Plus it offered the opportunity to combine two of our passions: writing new music and Jewish culture."

Comprising 12 tracks played on piano, saxophone and cello (courtesy of Londoner Francesca Ter-Berg), *Shtoltse Lider* brings

together various vibes, from frenetic jazz to lilting klezmer and lively 1920s cabaret. Meanwhile the poetry, which covers themes of emancipation, longing and forbidden desires, is sung in both Yiddish and English. Except for one special song, that is: 'Fun Yener Zayt Lid' ('On the Other Side of the Poem'). This stirring recording was made by Rokhl Korn herself. Paired with a melancholic melody, Korn's hoarse tones strike an almost eerie note. It's poignant to say the least.

"We decided not to sing it because [Korn] was there with the raspy lyrics," Gillner points out, "so we made an instrumental instead. I found it on YouTube, but it was really difficult to find a contact for it. We decided to leave it in anyway and about two weeks before we sent the album to be pressed, a contact at the Yiddish Book Centre in Montreal led us to Rokhl Korn's grandson. I sent the music to him and he gave us his blessing to use the recording. That was a happy day and I was especially touched because that's the closest we'll get to one of our poets."

Of the other writers featured, all of them faced a life of upheaval, whether from persecution or a restless unhappiness. Take

Margolin, for instance. She was born in Lithuania in 1887 and variously grew up in former Königsberg, Odessa and Warsaw. She journeyed to America to embark on a writing career, but quickly grew fidgety and left for London and Paris, before returning to Poland. There she met her husband-to-be and together they moved to Palestine, but small-town life didn't suit Margolin. It wasn't long before she abandoned her husband and young son for New York, where she remained until her death in 1952.

Margolin only released one volume of work, in 1929, from which the poem 'Maris Tfile' ('Mary's Prayer') is taken and features on the album. This psalm-like verse (which is just one of seven cycles about Mary) touches on gender inequality and compliance. Elsewhere, from a more nostalgic point of view, Korn reminisces in 'Fun Yener Zayt Lid' about the bliss of playing in her garden as a child, completely free of the problems in the world.

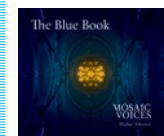
But you can read these for yourself, as accompanying the *Shtoltse Lider* CD is a booklet of poetry in both Yiddish and English. "During the whole process," says Gillner, "our aim has been to approach both the language and the works of the poets with respect and humble hearts. And while most people won't understand the lyrics in Yiddish, I hope the listener will feel a close, symbiotic and moving connection between the music and lyrics." ■

Visit idalouise.com to purchase *Shtoltse Lider* and find out about future tour dates.

ALBUM REVIEW

THE BLUE BOOK
by Michael Etherton & Mosaic Voices

★★★★☆



The Voice of Song and Prayer, known colloquially as the *The Blue Book*, has been the bedrock of Jewish choral music in the UK and Commonwealth ever since it was published in London in 1899. It was originally written for mixed female and male voices – common practice in mainstream Orthodox synagogues until the early 1960s. In today's Orthodox synagogues, tenors take the soprano and tenor parts, while baritones cover alto.

Mosaic Voices is the resident choir at London's New West End Synagogue under conductor and arranger Michael Etherton, who has recast the parts of 15 works for eight singers. Thus the choir makes the most of the full range of male voices from low bass to counter tenor, while maintaining the original flavour of the music.

The result is an elegant series of songs familiar to any Ashkenazi shulgoer, presented as high-art choral singing that stands up to the finest religious choral works in any tradition. Etherton coaxes well-balanced performances from his talented group of singers and their diction is faultless.

Compare, for example, the familiar 'Adon Olam' by Waley with the lesser known 17th-century version by Salamone Rossi. In both, the textures and dynamics from different traditions get due space, the Rossi attractively embellished by nine choristers. From the High Holy Days music, the choir sings the evocative strains of Haim Wasserzug's 'Zochreinu' and the traditional 'Shema Koleinu' in a tempo that allows the music to breathe.

To members of a voluntary synagogue choir, this album is intriguing and impressive. It's refreshing to hear the 'Hatikvah' (Israel's national anthem) sung in a high choral setting for a small choir. Most of us are used to joining in lustily at bar/bat mitzvahs and weddings. Mosaic Voices would have made the Victorian co-editors of *The Blue Book*, David M Davis and Rabbi Francis L Cohen, hugely proud. ■

Reviewed by Judi (alto) and Steve (bass) Herman, who sing in Northwood and Pinner Liberal Synagogue Choir. Buy *The Blue Book* at mosaicvoices.net