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Yiddish Music in the 21st Century
By Itzik Gottesman

“Eternal Flame” by Khanele di Khaznte (Cantor Arianne Brown)

*Love is there – my eternal flame.
It burns and is never extinguished
Avrom Goldfaden*

The singer and cantor Arianne Brown is well known in the Yiddish world in New York. When she still had her maiden name – Arianne Slack – she was seen and heard acting and singing in the Folksbiene Theater. In the *Forverts*, she writes the column “Tayere Khanzte (Dear Cantor),” in which she answers personal questions from readers all over the world. After she completed cantorial school at the Jewish Theological Seminary, she found a position at the well known Sinai Temple in Los Angeles, where she lives and works now as a cantor.

Just now, we’ve received a new CD by Arianne Brown with the name *Eternal Flame - A Yiddish Love Story*, in which she sings songs from the American Yiddish theater - both well known songs, and also those that are seldom sung. This is not her first recording; with her trio, Ashira, she put out a fine recording - *Suddenly Spirited* – which includes Yiddish, Hebrew, and English songs.

Arianne Brown does not come from a Yiddish speaking family; the “love” began for her when she was asked to sing a Yiddish song for a Holocaust program. This encouraged her to learn the language in which the *daveners* around her spoke every Shabbat. When she needed to prepare a medley of Yiddish theater songs for a concert, she discovered the amount of creations in this genre that are expressed with so much emotion and passion.

She began to sing Yiddish songs in her repertoire. She writes, “I have seen the profound effects that Yiddish has on people of all ages. From the woman in the nursing home who may not remember everything, yet can sing every lyric of *Bay Mir Bistu Sheyn*, and the quiet Holocaust survivor who opens up to me the minute I speak to him in Yiddish, to the children in my choir who think Yiddish songs are so much fun, Yiddish has a unique way of touching everyone.”

Brown begins her recording with the classic theater song *A Yidishe Mame – A Jewish Mother*, by Yellen and Pollack, sung in Yiddish and English. How many exaggeratedly emotional versions have we already heard of this song? However, Brown brings to the song such earnestness that she triumphs over the “shmalts.” The power of

her soprano voice also shows the listeners that this “overplayed” song warrants that listeners should hear it again with a fresh breath.

The song *Zog, Zog, Zog Es Mir – Tell Me, Tell Me, Tell Me* – by Towber and Trilling, is not very well known to us. It tells the story of a boy and a girl who meet in a forest. The simple arrangement of only a synthesizer/piano, is intentionally old fashioned and brings out the best aspect of the song – Brown’s strong, soaring voice.

In the *Love Medley*, Arianne Brown sings together with another from Los Angeles – the Yiddish theater star Mike Burstyn. Here, we hear the hits: *Du Shaynst Vi Di Zun*, *Sheyn Vi Di Levone*, and *Bay Mir Bistu Sheyn*. The untrained, yet authentic Yiddish sounding voice of Burstyn, and Brown’s strong voice, make a good pair. The emphasis in the recording is always on the words, which Brown, and certainly the veteran Burstyn, sing in an ingenious fashion.

A song such as *Ikh Hob Dikh Tsufil Lib – I Love You Much Too Much*, by Olshanetsky and Towber, has lately been recorded in a way that brings the tango rhythm of the song to the forefront, for tango is now in style. This has lately become a problem in the klezmer world, where people become captured more by the rhythm, and less by the words. Not everything that has a waltz rhythm, or a tango rhythm, means that people should dance. The melody may be created as such, but the song still doesn’t call for dancing. Brown’s interpretation, on the other hand, remains closer to the words and to the feel of the song, and does not emphasize the tango rhythm.

From the more modern repertoire, she sings Avraham Sutskever’s *Unter Dayne Vayse Shtern – Under Your Starry White Heaven*, which is arranged with a string accompaniment. The other songs are well known theater songs that the world will not tire of hearing. It is a tradition for cantors to sing the old, popular Yiddish songs. However, in this case, one gets the impression that Arianne Brown does not know the “prior histories” of many of the songs that she sings at all - that people often associate them with sweet sentimentality. In her recording, her “not knowing” actually helps her, for by approaching the songs with a “tabula rasa,” she gives a fresh look at them, and awakens in the listener a renewed interest in an old, but good, commodity.