

October 21, 2022

A Letter of Recommendation for Mr. Yonatan Turgeman

Dear members of the selection committee of the Katz Center Fellowship,

Yonatan Turgeman is one of the most brilliant, original, creative, and intellectually curious students I have had the privilege of supervising in over thirty-five years in academia. A passionate and devoted scholar and artist (he is a successful singer/songwriter), Yonatan’s incisive mind transforms a local problem into an encompassing problématique, without losing sight of the micro level from which it sprang. His intellectual radiance and maturity have already won him the prestigious President Fellowship of the Hebrew University and other honors. Having directed this honors program as well as the international Buber Postdoctorate Society of Fellows, I can state with confidence that he belongs to the highest echelon of such elite groups.

Yonatan completed his undergraduate and graduate degrees in musicology, including composition, and philosophy at Tel Aviv University, graduating with honors. To carry out his master's thesis on a complex issue in Aristotle's logic, he also studied ancient Greek, feeling that philological knowledge was necessary to clarify the claims he dealt with. The thesis was awarded a perfect score by both readers!

When Yonatan approached Prof. Seroussi and me some five years ago to request joint supervision, I was immediately struck by his singular personality, skills, and depth of thought. Ready for any challenge, curious, and thirsty for knowledge and insight, he came with a clear plan and an actual road map, which is rather unusual among PhD candidates at that stage.

Enthusiastically approved by the PhD committee, Yonatan’s doctoral dissertation presents a radically new way of reading the vital connection between the history of the discipline of musicology and the budding research of Jewish music around the turn of the twentieth century. That is not where he started his research, however. What makes this dissertation so unique, including for his mentors, is the extent to which his work is the result of a volatile mind that goes ever deeper into the matter he is engaged with. I will not detail here how and why he changed the trajectory of his research in the course of his work; suffice it to say that the process itself was instructive. Instead, I will detail a bit about where he ended up, as it illustrates how broadly and profoundly he grasps the field of Jewish music.

Titled “Neima Kedosha: The Problem of the Scholar-Composer in Modern Jewish Musicology Before Idelsohn,” the dissertation, which is to be submitted in two months, offers a new history of the formation of Jewish musicology. It revises the prevailing view according to which Jewish musicology, as linked to the newly emerged discipline of Musikwissenschaft, began with the pioneering work of Abraham Zvi Idelsohn and challenges two interrelated tenets underlying the reception of Idelsohn as “the father of Jewish musicology:” the assumption that modern musicology sought to procure its scientific legitimacy by detaching itself from any sort of artistic-creative agenda and the conviction that in Idelsohn’s writing the distinction between the scholar’s voice and the composer’s voice is clearly drawn. Through an analytic reading of major texts written by modern musicology’s founding fathers (Friedrich Chrysander, Philipp Spitta, and Guido Adler), “Neima Kedosha” establishes the relationship between the scholar and the composer as the guiding ideal of modern musicology: the musicologist was expected to join hands with the artist (e.g., by providing the necessary scientific basis for the artistic revival of past music). In other words, the scientific activity of the musicologist was understood as an analogue to that of the composer. A detailed analysis of Oskar Fleischer’s Neumenstudien exemplifies the importance of the scholar-artist question in the context of “comparative musicology” while revealing Fleischer’s near obsession with Jewish music. “Neima Kedosha” argues that Fleischer played an unparalleled role in the creation of a Jewish musicology, despite his later support of German racist values. The last chapter focuses on the new musicological discourse embraced by the Jewish cantors and portrays the rapid crystallization of a specific Jewish “mode” of musicology through a series of scholarly-artistic projects, all linked to Fleischer: the Judaica stand presented at the scientific musical exhibition in Vienna (1892), the first musicological edition of synagogue song collection (Eisenstadt’s Alt Israelitische Liturgische Gesänge, 1897), and the first public concert that attempted a scientific revival of “ancient” Jewish music (Berlin, 1901). I have no doubt that, as a book published by one of the leading university presses, this study will receive much attention.

Yonatan is also the author of a highly acclaimed book, *The Bridge Dead* (Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2017, Hebrew). This work, surprising in its originality, clarity, and poignant claims, is indicative of his intellectual maturity and exemplifies the highest level of cultural musical analysis. While not a research book in the conventional academic sense (it includes neither footnotes nor bibliography), it evinces extensive knowledge, some of which is only hinted at. Recently, Yonatan completed another riveting volume on Hebrew popular song, now titled *Black Treetops: Naomi Shemer and the Curse of Pizmon*, which I believe will provoke vital reactions. He also wrote an article, published in the new *Alpayim* periodical, reviewing Nissim Calderon's biography of Meir Ariel. In it, he sets out an original and compelling argument regarding the phenomenon of the “shir zemer,” a type of Israeli music that always includes both text and music. All these publications are extraordinary among PhD candidates. They stem from, and further promote, Yontan’s deep interest in the intricate relations between the creator/scholar and the making of “song” in Jewish and Israeli cultures.

In addition, in a paper Yonatan wrote for the seminar “Job as a Patron of Music” that I gave a few years ago, he made use of important seventeenth-century sources that he ingeniously connected to the topic of the seminar. This developed into a highly scholarly paper that traces the concept of “Pizmon,” central to both the piyyut heritage and to modern Israeli folk song, to a curious translation of a verse in the book of Job that has resonated widely and deeply in both Jewish and Christian writings since medieval times, all the way to prominent Wissenschaft des Judentums scholars. The article is almost ready for submission, and I have no doubt that it will find a home in a leading periodical of Jewish Studies.

The proposal Yonatan wrote for his application to the Katz Center is enthralling. He touched such fruitful and rich concepts and discovered sources that have not yet been the focus of researchers: the concept of *Sprachgesang.* Discussed in musicological circles mainly in connection with Schoenberg’s later novel technique of *Sprechgesang*, Yonatan proposes that Sprachgesang offers a key to understanding the vital nexus of modernism, budding nationalism (both German and Jewish), the rise of new disciplines, and the emergence of novel artistic techniques.

Yonatan Turgeman’s first-rate musical and musicological knowledge, in-depth philosophical understanding, solid philological infrastructure, accuracy, thoughtfulness, and impressive creativity show great promise for a brilliant future. I therefore enthusiastically recommend him as a candidate for the Sound and Music of Jewish Life group. His work, with few parallels, is on the cutting edge in its depth, width, originality, and understanding of our field. I would even add a qualification that I rarely use in similar situations: of the four people for whom I wrote reference letters, he is the first and foremost and should not be overlooked.

Please do not hesitate to be in touch if you have further questions regarding Yonatan Turgeman and his work.

Sincerely Yours,

Prof. Ruth HaCohen (Pinczower), 