

21 October 2022

A Letter of Recommendation for Dr. Naomi Cohn-Zentner

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

Dr. Cohn-Zentner, a tenure-track lecturer at Bar-Ilan university, is becoming one of the leading ethnomusicologists in Israel and in Jewish music in general of the generation now coming of age. She is aware of current trends in the field of ethnomusicology as well as those of older times. Dr. Cohn-Zentner was one of the founders of the new Israeli forum of ethnomusicology and has been very active in it since. She is a person of stature, education and knowledge, alert to new ideas and modes of thought. She will be an excellent member in the Sound and Music of Jewish Life group, would enrich the group with her sharp observations and acquaintance with the “present sounds and music of Jewish life,” well aware of their debts to history, close and distant.

I met Dr. Cohen-Zantner about seventeen years ago, when she began her studies in our department, in preparation for her doctoral studies. She took a "Music and Religion: Between Jews and Christians" seminar with me, and immediately revealed her intelligence, wide-education, and excellent presentation skills. Her lecture, which was based on her thesis – Sephardic influences on the Ashkenazi Synagogue in London – impressed me greatly. I was not surprised to see it in print a few years later. To a large extent, this work marks her future research directions: between Ashkenazi and Sephardic traditions, the liturgical and pre-liturgical worlds, as they reflect and affect the social circles in which they are embedded. I was therefore happy to join the committee for her doctorate, witnessing her growth as an involved, curious, broad-minded researcher, capable of integrating rich materials.

The study, about Shabbat singing in religious-nationalist circles, explores the origins of the tunes and the musical customs associated with them throughout the generations. While working on her research I temporarily turned from accompanying scholar to her informant: Naomi interviewed me about the tunes of my father's house, and the hours we spent together talking and recording were particularly enjoyable. I could testify to her skills as an ethnographer, her mastery of the relevant bodies of knowledge and her joy as a researcher.

Since then, I have read parts of the excellent doctorate that put special emphasis on the patterns of change that occurred in domestic and public spaces among Ashkenazi families throughout most of the twentieth century. This was the first large scale scholarly work addressing the music of Zemiroth Shabbat as sung by Ashkenazi families in Israel or abroad. In the study, Cohn-Zentner suggests that the shifts and changes in the transmission patterns and performance practice of Zemirot in national religious families mirrored the social and cultural forces shaping the collective self of this sector of the Israeli society. Her working assumption, that Zemirot were crucial in shaping the performative aspect of the families' Sabbath meals, received much substance and rich nuances.

I heard Naomi lecturing in various forums on her PhD topics and on new topics. Her lectures are always enlightening, well-structured, and meticulous. I loved her research on "Kol Mekadesh Shevii" tunes in the European diaspora and its applications in the context of the European Jewish space, which will soon appear in print. Recently, she turned to dealing with Jewish music of the Ottoman Safed following the fascinating revelations she uncovered. I found her way of thinking in this matter original and her findings astute.

Her current project, generously funded by the Israeli Science Foundation, which she carries together with Dr. Avigail Wood (of Haifa university) is promising. Entitled: “new musical practices among religious Jewish-Israeli women,” it is the first comprehensive study of this burgeoning field of activity in Israel, comprising of “ersatz” services for orthodox women “before the event” (e.g. Yom Kippur prayers and niggun, sung before the actual day). In August, in the framework of the World Congress of Jewish Music I led a panel in which they presented their work. The panel sensitized us to the methodological complexities of the research and stirred instructive discussion. Reinforcing religious women, as individuals and a group, it disclosed the subversive potential of these conventions, which are gaining popularity and hold in wider populations and sectors.

Naomi’s proposal to the Sound and Music of Jewish Life group builds on one of her major contributions in this research project, which she is exploring beyond the arena of women activity, i.e. the wide spreading phenomenon: the “reenactment” concerts in Israel (particularly in Jerusalem). In her proposed study, she examines how tradition shifts through reenactment of time- and site-specific liturgical events within “secular” times and spaces – concert halls and their like. The major aim of this study is the inquiry of the ways audiences today fashion new and authentic ways their traditions while enhancing their public presence and enriching their affective content. In the framework of the Katz Center group, comparisons of the phenomena with currents trends in North America and other diasporas would yield further sociological and historical insights that will enrich the group’s accumulating body of knowledge significantly.

Given her wide-range perspectives, rich research experience, engaging personality and fascinating proposal, I strongly and enthusiastically recommend Dr. Naomi Cohn-Zentner as a candidate to the Sound and Music of Jewish Life group. I am confident she will flourish in the center and enrich the group in various way.

Please do not hesitate to be in touch if you have further questions regarding Dr. Cohen-Zentner’s work.

Sincerely Yours,

Prof. Ruth HaCohen (Pinczower), 