

21 October 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 to supervise 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 myself directed this honors program as well as the international Buber Post-Doctorate Society of Fellows, I can say with confidence that he belongs to the top-notch of such elite groups.

Yonatan completed his undergraduate and graduate degree 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 100 by both readers!

When Yonatan approached Prof. Seroussi and myself some five years ago asking for joint supervision, I was immediately struck by his rare 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 is a radically new way to read 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. What makes this dissertation so unique, also for his mentors, is the extent to which his work is the result of a volatile mind, that ever goes 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 to say that the process itself was instructive. Instead, I will detail a bit where he ended up, as it shows 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, 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 of (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 analogues 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 best university presses, this study will receive much attention.

Yonatan is also the author of a well-acclaimed book, *The Bridge Dead* (Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2017, Hebrew). This surprising work, in its originality, clarity, and poignant claims, is indicative of intellectual maturity, and the highest level of cultural musical analysis. While not a research book in the full academic sense (it does not include footnotes and a bibliography) it yet 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 rare among PhD candidates. They all 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, which traces the concept of “Pizmon” central to both the piyyut heritage, as well as to modern Israeli folk song, to a curious translation of a verse in the book of Job that resonated wide and deep in writings of both Jewish and Christian writers 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 Katz Center is enthralling. He touched such a fruitful and rich concept and discovered sources that have not been yet in the focus of researchers: The concept of *Sprachgesang.* Discussed in musicological circles mainly in connection with Schoenberg’s later novel technique of *Sprechgesang*, Sprachgesang, proposes Yonatan, offers a key to understanding the vital nexus of modernism, budding nationalism (both German and Jewish), the rise of new disciplines and emergence of novel artistic technique.

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 to the Sound and Music of Jewish Life group. His work is of the cutting edge, without many parallels, in its depth, width, originality, and understanding of our field. I would even add a sentence 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 missed.

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), 