

Opponent's review of the Doctoral Thesis

Candidate: Martha Stellmacher M. A.

Title of the doctoral thesis: *Jüdische Gemeinschaft und religiöse Praxis in Prager Synagogen von der zweiten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts bis zur Schoah: Eine ethnohistorische Studie*

Submitted on 23rd of September 2019 at Hochschule für Musik, Theater und Medien Hannover and Faculty of Humanities, Charles University, Prague.

Opponent: Mgr. Veronika Seidlová, Ph.D.

Martha Stellmacher's original interdisciplinary study focuses on the socio-cultural practices and discourses of religious music-making of the Prague Jewish community and its approx. thirty synagogue congregations from the second half of the 19th century until the holocaust. As Jewish worship services are primarily chanted, Jewish ritual practices inevitably involve music-making, although it might not have always been emically conceptualized as such. Although the core of Jewish ritual is a vocal performance of a body of sacred texts, the liturgical practices are far from being homogenous as local/community conventions play an important role. They have been negotiated within broader social fields among diverse groups of actors from inside, but also outside of the more or less autonomous local Jewish communities. Therefore, Martha Stellmacher's main research question is, which forms and meanings Jews gave to their praying and acting in various Prague synagogues and prayer-rooms in that period in the context of massive religious, social and political changes. It is important to mention right at the beginning, that her text is the very first comprehensive in-depth academic study of this topic in the selected time and space frames, filling the so far hopelessly blind spot in a cultural history of the Czech lands.

Martha Stellmacher's thesis successfully connects recent academic discourses of ethnomusicology, historical musicology, historical anthropology, anthropology of ritual, and Jewish studies. Concerning specific theoretical concepts used, she is inspired namely 1) by leading scholars of a new field of historical ethnomusicology, such as Philip Bohlman and Christopher Waterman; 2) by leading ethnomusicologists specialized in Jewish music, such as Kay Kaufman Shelemay, Judit Frigyesi, Jeffrey Summit, Edwin Seroussi and Philip Bohlman; 3) by anthropological works of Roy Rappaport, Ute Hüsken and Frank Neubert which theorize ritual from a perspective of a negotiation process among social actors; 4) by works on the history of Jewish communities in the Czech lands mainly in the 19th and 20th century, such as those by Hillel Kieval, Kateřina Čapková, Cathleen Giustino, Blanka Soukupová, Ines Koeltzsch, Martina Niedhammer, Alena Heitlinger et al.

Since the topic of religious practice of the Jewish community in Prague (as an umbrella organization with its manifold congregations) in the 19th and 20th centuries is almost unexplored (i.e. in general, not only from its music aspects), Martha Stellmacher's study is

based largely on primary sources from her long-term in-depth archival research (mainly writings of Israelite / Jewish religious communities and offices, collections of music scores and period reporting), as well as material and oral history sources. Apart from several interviews she has conducted herself, the author constructs her data in view of the fact that the documents examined were created for specific non-academic goals that she reflects.

Using her unusual multilingual competencies in an in-depth qualitative analysis of sources in German, Czech and Hebrew, Martha Stellmacher has successfully managed to examine a robust body of them. As the research has so far been mostly limited to synagogues with their own buildings, she has remarkably brought to light a large number of written, material and visual sources about other, mostly unknown smaller prayer rooms in hired or private premises. Following her well readable writing, I was almost constantly amazed by the wealth of sources she has been patiently and relentlessly discovering even in the most improbable archival funds. The key ones come from 1) an unprocessed (and only exceptionally accessible) part of the archive of the Jewish Religious Community in Prague (ŽNO), located in the Prague City Archives (AHMP); 2) three music collections, which contain music manuscripts and prints from Jewish communities in the Czech lands: a) the music archive in the Jewish Museum in Prague; b) the small Frankfurt am Main collection; and especially c) the newly discovered collection of music from the Jeruzalémská Synagogue with more than 400 inventory items, which was found in 2012 in the cabinet of the synagogue organ.

Martha Stellmacher segments and analyzes her data according to three main aspects: the organization aspects, the actors and the practice frame. Firstly, she describes the structural situation of the Prague Jewish Community and its largely autonomous congregations. She warns against analyzing the period data using the later developed denominational terms and her data obviously resist these clear-cut categories. Secondly, the author describes the tasks and roles of the actors of the musical-liturgical practice: the attenders at synagogue, the prayer-leader called as *chazzan* (or cantor), *Boruch Scheomar* singing confraternities and synagogue choirs as well as some organists. The second part of the study concentrates on the various and entangled self-understandings of Prague Jews and their expression within the religious practice. These are examined on three levels: 1) As the members of one synagogue congregation; 2) As Prague Jews. A part from other aspects, the author explores period narratives about local, specifically Prague traditions; 3) As subjects, citizens and members of language and national groups. The structure of her work is well-thought and the argumentation lines of her interpretations of the data are coherent and clear.

I would suggest one question for the defense, which is not meant as a critique of any omission in the text but rather stems from my own research interests: How could be explained the almost absolute lack of prewar audio sources of local *hazzanut*?

To conclude, the author has successfully fulfilled her research objectives. Based on the analysis of period sources, she assembled a vivid fine mosaic of period Jewish ritual sound practices. She has shown how the practices between the different actors were negotiated and how new ones were decided but also how the elements understood as traditional were “ensured”. Concerning formal requirements, the reviewed work is precise and exemplary. Overall, it is a pioneering work in this topic in the selected time and space frames and of an excellent quality.

Final assesment of the doctoral thesis

After reviewing Martha Stellmacher’s doctoral thesis, I recommend it for defense and evaluate it as *summa cum laude*.

In Hradec Králové, 15th of November 2019

Mgr. Veronika Seidlová, Ph.D.