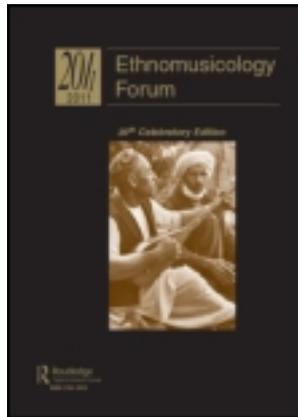


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# Music, Memory and History

Kay Kaufman Shelemay

## In memory of Stuart Feder

*This paper explores the interactive relationship of memory and history during the ethnographic research process, using as its case study interviews with Syrian Jews about a hymn (pizmon) repertory. The paper uses strategies of the new historicism as well as concepts from psychology, literary theory and anthropology to explore ways in which ethnomusicologists are instrumental both in eliciting memories and in constructing historical narratives.*

*Keywords: Memory; History; Musical Ethnography; Contrafacta; Middle East; Syrian Jews; Diaspora; Musical Transmission*

In this essay, I will explore the relationship between music, memory and history. While I have long been involved with studies in historical ethnomusicology (Shelemay 1980, 1989), my interest in music and memory is more recent. It dates to the early 1990s, when I completed research for the book *Let Jasmine Rain Down* (1998), about transmission and performance among Syrian Jews living in diaspora of a repertory of Hebrew-texted paraliturgical hymns called *pizmonim* (s. *pizmon*).<sup>1</sup> Throughout the research process, members of the Syrian Jewish community spoke so often and so eloquently about the ways in which music-making shaped and interacted with memory that the resulting monograph necessarily became an ethnography of music and memory. When I was invited to deliver a keynote lecture in 2003 for the British Forum for Ethnomusicology on a topic relating to historical studies, I returned to data gathered among Syrian Jews as well as to their *pizmon* song repertory for source material. What I originally envisioned as a paper on ethnomusicological approaches to music history, however, soon became an

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exploration of the interactive relationship of memory and history in musical contexts and in the process of musical ethnography.

That the boundaries between memory and history discussed here are blurred and tricky to negotiate must be acknowledged from the beginning. Memory is a vast domain, at once familiar and formidable. We tend to assume that we understand the meaning of the word “memory”, which has been briefly and popularly defined as “the faculty by which things are recalled or kept in the mind” (Thompson 1995, 850). Memory is first and foremost an individual cognitive faculty in which reside traces of one’s personal and autobiographical experiences; some of these traces reside close to the surface of consciousness and are easily recalled, while others remain out of everyday awareness but still vulnerable to recall in response to various types of stimulation. Memory is at the same time a social phenomenon, shaped by collective experience. What is often termed “collective memory” is knowledge that is shared with others through various forms of expression, including speech, music, dance and other expressive media, and that emerges in part from a common expectation that the moment or event is, in fact, memorable.

History constitutes narratives about the past (often, but not always, in chronological order) that are constructed and/or acknowledged by virtue of institutional sanction, scholarly hypothesis or broad-based social acceptance; these same narratives are often revised or reconstructed in the same contexts that validated them in the first place. The difficulty in separating history from memory has long been acknowledged by historians, especially those working the field of oral history, who necessarily work at the margins of history and memory:

Formerly, the process of generating oral history was considered uncomplicated and the text of the interview transparent: the efforts of an interviewer to gather material of historical use from a neutral (occasionally partisan) stance. History would emerge at some later time when writers and scholars used these oral sources. Now, more theoretically oriented researchers . . . have speculated that the interviews *themselves* represent history: they have been compiled within a historical frame negotiated by the interviewer and narrator, within contemporary trends, within certain definable conventions of language and cultural interaction. (Dunaway and Baum 1984, xiii–xiv)

Like oral history, musical ethnography provides an open window on the construction of historical narratives. But the ethnographic materials presented here shed additional light on the symbiotic relationship between memory and history. Ethnomusicologists do not simply gather individual and collective verbal memories shared during interviews; they are also instrumental in elaborating memories in and about musical performance into narratives about the past. The ethnographer is thus an important but largely unacknowledged player in the elicitation of memories and the construction of histories.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper I will explore the convergence of memory and history within the context of interviews carried out in September 1992, when I spent several weeks in Mexico City interviewing members of the Syrian Jewish community there. I visited

the home of Isaac and Ruth Cain twice. Isaac Cain, a cantor who both performed and composed *pizmonim*, was born in Mexico City in the mid-1920s to parents who had recently emigrated from Aleppo, Syria. Ruth Tawil Cain, born in New York to Syrian Jewish immigrants, had spent her adult life in Mexico City from the time of her marriage to Isaac in the 1950s. Ruth sat in on both conversations with Isaac to help clarify her Spanish-speaking husband's halting English. Yet later, during the process of transcribing the interviews, it became very clear to me that Ruth Cain had done much more than offer translation: she had both encouraged her husband to share his memories of *pizmonim* and offered some recollections of her own.<sup>3</sup>

To organize my inquiry and shape its presentation here, I adapt a strategy suggested by scholars of what has been termed "the new historicism".<sup>4</sup> Drawing on Stephen Greenblatt and the late Joel Fineman's consideration of the isolated anecdote as a point of entry into cultural analysis (Greenblatt 1990a, 5; also see Fineman 1989), I have used a statement made at a single ethnographic moment as a point of departure for both exploring a site of memory and anchoring historical discourse. Following Greenblatt, I will use the words of a specific individual in the hope of gaining insight into how "reality for each society is constructed to a significant degree out of *specific* qualities of its language and symbols" (Greenblatt 1990b, 32).<sup>5</sup> I am further interested in the ways in which statements such as the one explored below explicitly articulate deep-seated feelings conveyed by the individual, setting forth psychological and aesthetic information vital to understanding how memory and history interact.<sup>6</sup>

Let me begin this exploration by quoting an excerpt from an interview during which Ruth Cain recalls music of prayers and *pizmonim* she has heard during Syrian Jewish synagogue rituals throughout her life:

They're so pretty, and when you hear them all together . . . it makes me closer to where we came from, to my roots. I feel it, even though I was born in the United States, and my parents came [from Aleppo] at a very young age . . . I always feel it every time I'm sitting in the *shul* [synagogue] and listening to the prayers. Maybe because I heard them ever since I can remember, since I was a young child. And the way everyone is together and understands, and sings with one voice, that means a lot to me. It makes me feel part of a tradition that was before, that is now, and probably will continue for many, many years. That won't be lost. As long as they keep it up each year, year after year. That's going to keep up forever, as long as there is a Hebrew nation or our people exist. I think so, from father, to son, to grandchild. This is nothing I've thought about a lot. Just a feeling you have when you're there. (Interview, 7 September 1992)

From this single quote I will extract the themes of this paper, allowing Ruth Cain's recollections to guide us in an excursion both through memories about music and into the historical narrative constructed by and through these recollections. I will travel within what might be termed metaphorically Ruth's "memory palace". I borrow this phrase from historian Jonathan Spence (1983), who has written about Renaissance memory practices that constructed imagined spaces filled with objects

to cue memory. Translating this image to accommodate musical memories necessitates conceiving a space filled with many different sounds that continue to transform each time they are remembered.<sup>7</sup> Ruth Cain's comments, as well as the larger discussion of which they were a part, reveal the manner in which musical experience is sustained in memory as both a sound world and an affect-laden recollection of the past. This paper seeks to explicate what Ruth Cain has so eloquently expressed in her own words, the past in the present as conveyed through music. This past is always in motion: the contents of Ruth's memory palace are occasionally rearranged, like treasured objects that can be dusted off and moved to different spots, re-establishing new relationships with each other and with the structure they inhabit.

In approaching Ruth Cain's statement, I have been stimulated by discussions of memory by scholars from several disciplines. One study of medieval lyric processes discusses "the fundamental fluidity of genre between rhetoric, music, poetry, and the visual arts" within the medium of memory (Enders 1992, 461).<sup>8</sup> This work prodded me to move back and forth between rhetoric about music in ethnographic interviews and consideration of the musical/poetic structures elicited through this process. I will suggest that within shared social worlds – domains anthropologists have traditionally termed "cultures" or "subcultures" – verbal and musical forms do not simply occupy the same times and spaces but can converge through the workings of memory in both their form and content.<sup>9</sup> In this way, as I hope to demonstrate, it is possible to examine "the fascinating critical counterpoint" (Enders 1992, 460) between speech about music and songs elicited through these discussions.

I will also propose that, within ethnographic interviews, expressions of memory are transformed by all participants to construct history. Here I have been influenced by Patrick H. Hutton, who has written an intellectual history of memory studies by historians, psychologists, sociologists and social theorists, tracing throughout multiple points of juncture between memory and history that he calls "crossroads" (Hutton 1993, 1). As a musical ethnographer, I suggest that intersections or "crossroads" of memory and history take place within the exchanges about music and music-making that constitute the ethnographic interview. The materials discussed here support Hutton's statement that "historical understanding originally issued from memory, which in turn became hidden in the historians' abstractions. The inquiry into the history of memory requires consideration of the historiographical relationship between memory and history, for memory is integral to historical understanding itself" (Hutton 1993, 16).

In ethnographic interviews, individuals both articulate autobiographical memories through speech and convey musical memories through song, with the verbal expressions serving as only "one component of autobiographical memory" (Rubin 1996, 2). While autobiographical memories are surely grounded in "affective, interpersonal, sociocultural, and historical contexts," autobiographical remembering can also be viewed as a momentary occurrence, "a product of *improvisational* reconstructive remembering activities" (Barclay 1996, 94–5). Psychologist Craig

Barclay has compared spontaneous moments of remembering to processes of musical improvisation, both of which he notes are not at all random, but are part of “an organized and grounded activity” connected to movements, sounds, memories, or feelings” (1996, 95). Barclay further uses terminology that helps to illuminate the process that welds memories into historical narratives: *momentary selves*, he suggests, are “composed in the present through autobiographical remembering”, and are then re-fashioned into *narrative selves*, composed in known story forms (1996, 96).<sup>10</sup> I would take Barclay’s suggestion a step further and propose that these individual recollections are composed in part under the influence of collective memory.

Autobiographical memories that emerge and are subsequently recast in group settings are shaped in part by the desire to communicate. In the case of Isaac and Ruth Cain, their autobiographical memories were narrated in counterpoint during an interview. Isaac most often served as the “narrator” (the individual who recounts the story), with Ruth acting as the “mentor”, who guides the narrative by providing retrieval cues and directions; occasionally, these roles reversed, as will become clear below. A third interlocutor in the ethnographic interview is, of course, the “monitor”, the ethnographer (in this case myself), who evaluates the narrative as it is negotiated and seeks to ascertain that it is complete. In this instance, too, the monitor at moments assumes the role of mentor, providing cues and redirecting the conversation (Hirst and Manier 1996, 275–6).<sup>11</sup> In understanding the transformation of memory into historical narrative, we must acknowledge the ways in which narrative structures are constantly constructed within the framework of an interview as well as evaluate ways in which these narratives may be linked to specific cultural values and structures (Barclay 1996, 122).

The following discussion has four sections, each expanding on one aspect of Ruth Cain’s statement quoted above. Part I, “When you hear them all together”, addresses the interaction of individual and collective memories in the recollection of the musical experience. Part II, “Listening to the prayers and singing them in one voice”, surveys memory processes, including the moments of encoding that may be understood as taking place during musical performance and reception. Part III, “Meaning a lot and making me feel”, discusses musical memories as intertwined with affect, emotion and nostalgia. Part IV, “Keeping it up, year after year”, explores patterns of repetition and reinvention so crucial within musical performances and memory processes alike. I will track each of these dimensions through discussion of the *pizmonim* and conclude with final thoughts on memory, history and musical ethnography.

### **I. “When You Hear Them All Together”: Individual and Collective Memories of the Musical Experience**

What happens when “you hear music all together”? Here Ruth Cain recalls hearing *pizmonim* in the synagogue, surrounded by friends and family in the separate section reserved for women. How does this experience relate to memory? In all societies,

language relating to or describing memory is largely metaphorical; representations about memory create their own perspectives (Draaisma 2000, 3). Within European intellectual history since the 17th century, changing metaphors for memory have been couched in the terminology and concepts associated with technologies of their times.<sup>12</sup> Less fully explored are metaphors used for memory outside Euro-American historical and cultural contexts, or the manner in which the multi-layered and rapidly changing cultural experiences such as those of immigrants or refugees transform these metaphors. It has been observed that many societies use various kinds of storage spaces as metaphors for memory, including archives, warehouses, caves and, as noted earlier, palaces. Indeed, the act of storage can be viewed as a situated practice through which a number of social groups construct identity, as well as remember and control knowledge (Hendon 2000). In Ruth Cain's quote, the musical experience at once fills a place (the synagogue), a time (childhood) and further travels with Ruth across both time and space to transport past experience into the future. In Ruth's description of memory processes, too, memory is often represented as a "feeling", which can be either a consciousness or an absence of consciousness of what happens (Damasio 1999).

Music-making and subsequent recollections of the musical experience also bridge the divide between individual and collective memory that tend to be separated in the discourse of many disciplines. Ruth Cain's memories move across boundaries of her personal consciousness to touch on collective memories of her community: music, especially in ritual settings, is valued as an experience that joins individuals with a group. Ruth's recollections provide a rich example of the way in which narratives about the musical experience move quite comfortably between the poles of the individual and the collective; music is at once the outcome of individual creativity and creativity's grounding as a social act.<sup>13</sup>

If notions of memories as contained within physical and psychic spaces draw on cultural knowledge, we must also explore the ways in which musical sound is conceived as a storehouse for memory. Here we can turn to *Ḥai Hazan* (Figure 1), a *pizmon* which was a central subject of discussion during the interview with Isaac and Ruth Cain, and which resides at the crossroads of memory and history.

The *pizmon* is one that Isaac Cain's teacher, Hayyim Tawil, had taught him during Cain's musical studies with Tawil in Mexico City during the early 1950s; this *pizmon* had special significance for Tawil that he explained to Cain. *Pizmon Ḥai Hazan* was composed in Aleppo, Syria, sometime before 1912, the year Hayyim Tawil immigrated to Mexico City. The song was written to celebrate the occasion of Hayyim Tawil's wedding by the premier *pizmon* composer of turn-of-the-twentieth-century Aleppo, Hayyim Tawil's teacher, Rabbi Raphael Taboush. In the Hebrew text of the song an acrostic spells the name Hayyim, a mnemonic device often found in these songs, allowing the text at once to commemorate and to historicize the individual to whom the song was originally dedicated.<sup>14</sup> While most *pizmonim* have been commissioned by families to celebrate life-cycle occasions such as circumcisions, *bar mitzvahs* and weddings, this *pizmon* is relatively unusual in that it was composed voluntarily as a surprise for Hayyim Tawil by his teacher – a circumstance that

Live, He who forever nourishes everything. You are He, You are He. The single Master:

O God, my redeemer, forgive my betrayal. Lift up my lot. Your kindness has always been sublime.

They will shine brightly, they will testify for you, they thank you faithfully.

My community shall sing inside my sanctuary.

My sublime Lord, their music shall always be pure.

My king is the ruler forever. Administer your kindness upon the nation of Abraham.

O God, my king! O Lord the merciful, please raise their banner forever and I shall tell of your righteousness.

Strengthen the special community. Bless bride and groom. Grant them long years. They will glow like the light of a sapphire.

**Figure 1** English Translation of *Pizmon Ḥai Hazan* (Translation by Joshua Levisohn).  
Source: Shelemay 1998, 265.

extends its significance beyond commemoration of Tawil's wedding to serve as a tribute to the student/teacher relationship between Tawil and Taboush. The text of the song refers to the singing of *pizmonim* within the Jewish sanctuary, paralleling Ruth Cain's memory of hearing such songs in that same context; it also refers to the community that participates in the *pizmon*'s performance. The *pizmon* at its time of composition celebrated a wedding, which over subsequent decades it came to commemorate; the wedding is the subject of the final, joyous verse of the song.

*Ḥai Hazan* is set in *maqām rāst*, which is distinguished by its intervallic structure with neutral third- and seventh-scale degrees. Almost all *pizmonim* are contrafacta, most of them borrowing the tunes of popular Arab songs widely circulated in oral tradition and later transmitted through sound recordings and other media. The melody of *Ḥai Hazan* was borrowed from an Arab song with the incipit *Hovah Zeh Atzron Sa'ir*, which we know from its transliteration in Hebrew above the new Hebrew text in the printed Brooklyn *pizmon* edition (Shrem 1988 [1964], 117); however, we have no further information about this source melody. It is likely that this melody (*laḥan*), like most *pizmon* tunes of its period, was first heard by Taboush during his frequent visits to local Aleppo coffeehouses. The perpetuation through a *pizmon* of an Arab melody that must have been widely sung at its time of borrowing literally sustains the memory of a sound from the past.

The use of *maqām rāst* may also carry additional meanings connected with the patriarchal relationship between teacher Taboush and his student, Tawil: *rāst* is considered to be “the father of the *maqāmāt*” and is used in the Syrian Jewish liturgy to set the first portion of four of the Five Books of Moses (J. Saff, interview, 20 November 1984). Within the Arab musical system, too, *maqām rāst* holds the position as the first *maqām* used in a collection (*dīwān*) of Arab songs (Marcus 1989, 422). The Hebrew text echoes the cadence and rhyme scheme of the original Arabic text of the *pizmon*. Figure 2 presents a transcription of *Ḥai Hazan* from a performance recorded on 13 November 1984 in Brooklyn, New York. The rendition is typical of this song as it is transmitted within the Brooklyn community within which Ruth Tawil Cain grew up and with which Isaac Cain has been in close musical contact throughout his adult life during annual visits to New York.<sup>15</sup>

As the transcription indicates, many performances of *Ḥai Hazan* begin with a short vocal improvisation, *layālī*, which is commonly pronounced *ya’eli*. However, this quintessential musical gesture of improvisation from the Arab musical tradition melds with the first word of *Ḥai Hazan*’s Hebrew refrain, *yah el* (literally “Oh God”). In this way, the moment of improvisation at the beginning of the song is welded to a more fixed, strophic form. In subsequent verses of the song, the chorus joins and becomes increasingly active, transforming what began as a solo rendition into a decidedly shared musical experience.

If the *pizmon Ḥai Hazan* provides a rich, yet typical example of the ways in which individual and collective memories are fashioned into the texts, tunes and performance practice of this song repertory, the manner in which the song entered into discussion during the interview provides a salient example of the ways in which individual memories become marked for, and transformed into, historical narratives through the ethnographic interview.

Early on in our discussion, I asked Isaac Cain if he knew any of six popular *pizmonim* which I had, from prior fieldwork, ascertained were performed regularly by Syrian Jews in New York and Israel; before coming to Mexico, the last site of my multi-locale research project, I had decided to cross-check these six *pizmonim* in Mexico City. One song within this small sample was a beloved wedding *pizmon* also composed by Raphael Taboush in Aleppo, titled *Melekh Raḥaman*. I mentioned to Isaac that I had heard that *pizmon* sung the previous Saturday morning at a Mexico City Syrian synagogue when a young couple was called forth to receive a blessing before their wedding; he responded that he knew *pizmon Melekh Raḥaman* well. At that moment, Ruth Cain intervened, her memory of another *pizmon* almost certainly cued by my mention of the wedding *pizmon Melekh Raḥaman*, along with my reference to its local performance the previous Sabbath. Ruth turned to Isaac and said: “You told me about another *pizmon* that Ḥakham Hayyim Tawil taught you from his wedding.”<sup>16</sup>

Ruth’s recollection that there was another wedding *pizmon* marked her entry into the conversation as mentor. The transcript shows that her comment clearly entered into my memory as well – three times subsequently during the interview I acted as

## Ḥai Hazan

Layālī:  $\text{♩} = 100$

ya-'e-li ya - 'e - li ya \_\_\_\_\_

2  
\_\_\_\_\_ el \_\_\_\_\_

3 Verse:  $\text{♩} = 104$

Ḥai ha-zan \_\_\_\_\_ la - kol \_\_\_\_\_ ta - mid \_\_\_\_\_

4  
\_\_\_\_\_ a - tah hu \_\_\_\_\_ a - tah hu \_\_\_\_\_ a - don \_\_\_\_\_

5  
ya - ḥid \_\_\_\_\_ a - tah hu \_\_\_\_\_ a - tah hu \_\_\_\_\_ a - don ya - ḥid \_\_\_\_\_

6  
\_\_\_\_\_

7 Refrain:

yah el go - 'a - li go - a - li \_\_\_\_\_ s' - lah \_\_\_\_\_ ma - 'a \_\_\_\_\_

8  
li sah et go-ra \_\_\_\_\_ li sa - g' - vu \_\_\_\_\_

9  
ḥa - sa - dakh \_\_\_\_\_ ta \_\_\_\_\_ dir \_\_\_\_\_ sa \_\_\_\_\_ g' - vu \_\_\_\_\_ sa - g' - vu \_\_\_\_\_ ḥa - sa - dakh

10  
\_\_\_\_\_ ta - dir \_\_\_\_\_

Figure 2 Partial Transcription of Pizmon Ḥai Hazan. Performance recorded on 13 November 1984, Brooklyn, New York, with Moses Tawil, Isaac Cabasso and Ensemble.

monitor, requesting that Isaac Cain sing Tawil's wedding *pizmon*. After years of ethnography on the *pizmonim*, I was always on the alert for songs transmitted with memories of compositional process and personal associations still intact. The older songs in the repertory composed in Aleppo were of particular interest since their texts had been passed down, and printed without dedications or any of the sort of prefatory material that accompanies many 20th-century *pizmonim* composed post-immigration, to the Syrian diaspora.<sup>17</sup> While one could often tell that a song had been composed for a wedding due to textual references to an unnamed groom and bride, a *pizmon* could come to life – and its history be recorded – only through individual recollections. During the Cain interview, my interventions were offered to jog my own memory as well as that of Isaac; it is clear I wanted to prevent this *pizmon* from being forgotten in the flow of the interview.

My first request is recorded as: “What I'd love for you to do is to sing the *pizmon* composed by Raphael Taboush for Hayyim Tawil so that we don't forget.” A few minutes later I prodded: “We should sing this *pizmon* before we forget.” And a third time, still unsuccessful, somewhat impatiently, I interjected: “So am I going to hear this famous *pizmon*?” It took a fourth request, this one from Ruth, to persuade Isaac to sing the *pizmon* he had learned from his teacher. Ruth said: “You were going to tell Kay about the song Raphael Taboush made up for Hayyim Tawil.”

Ruth had again cued the pivotal memory – that the *pizmon* had been composed by the renowned Aleppo composer Raphael Taboush for his student, Tawil, who in turn taught the song to his own student, Cain. Only then did Isaac Cain discuss and sing the *pizmon*, framing his own performance within the musical and biographical experience of other composer/singers before him as well as within a pedagogical lineage.

## II. Listening to the Prayers and “Singing Them in One Voice”

The processes of remembering music stems from moments of encoding that may subsequently cross into multiple domains; for instance, individual memories of hearing a song may be re-inscribed and reconstituted in forms ranging from diaries to sound recordings. Music provides a particularly rich and complex case study for students of memory since its encoding process is almost inevitably multiple or elaborative, setting into motion connections that cross many different sensory modalities and enter into other aspects of experience.<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, the process of elaborative encoding is so crucial to the maintenance of memory in general that it is purposefully embedded in psychological experiments. Successful memory experiments almost always entail elaborative encoding, since viewed from a cognitive perspective:

only a certain type of semantic encoding promotes high levels of memory performance – an elaborative encoding operation that allows you to integrate new information with what you already know . . . . If we want to improve our chances of remembering an incident or learning a fact, we need to make sure that we carry out

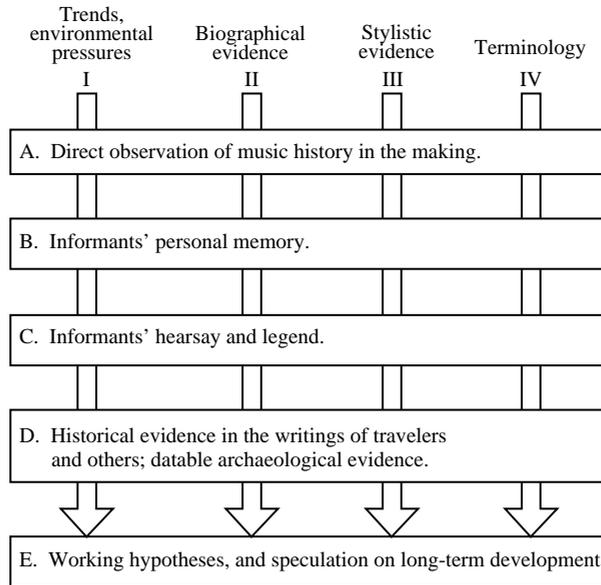
elaborative encoding by reflecting on the information and relating it to other things we already know. (Schacter 1996, 450)

A musical event such as the singing of a *pizmon* will be unconsciously associated with multiple aspects of the initial place and time in which it was first encountered; recall can also be consciously cued through mnemonic devices such as a written text or recording. The learning of *pizmon Ḥai Hazan* at a lesson with a beloved teacher established for Isaac Cain a memory trace that was further elaborated by his own performances of the song over time. Elaborative encoding persists and compounds itself through processes of musical transmission, widening and deepening. One can track this process at the moments in ethnographic interviews in which memories of musical acquisition collide, converge and are elaborated.

Let us return to *pizmon Ḥai Hazan* and the interview during which it was sung. Repeated mention of the *pizmon* cued a range of related reminiscences – memories of different times, places, people and events from the past. Some references were followed by fragmentary recollections. Ruth, whose maiden name also happens to be Tawil, recalled an occasion in the early 1950s when, as a newly-wed who had recently arrived in Mexico, she went along to one of Isaac's *pizmon* lessons with Hayyim Tawil. "I talked to all the family," she reminisced, "and it turns out that we [she and the Hayyim Tawil family] are cousins, we were originally one family." Cued by mention of the song, Ruth recalls a day 40 years earlier on which she, in effect, constructed her own connection to the song. If Isaac learned and has continued to transmit the *pizmon Ḥai Hazan* for half a century, Ruth has constructed an historical narrative of her own relationship to that heritage as part of the biological continuity with both her husband's teacher and, over time, with her husband's most treasured students, their grandchildren.

Mention of the song cued other reminiscences of Hayyim Tawil and set into motion an exchange of roles during the interview. Ruth recalled: "Ḥakham Hayyim Tawil, when he was teaching my husband, he was completely blind . . . . He was a really old man, about 90 years old. Completely blind." Isaac immediately assumed the role of mentor, correcting and supplementing Ruth's memory, adding chronological details to historicize his perspective: "Yes, he was about 80. Before I got to New York, he was OK. When I came [back to Mexico], married already, he was blind."

Moments such as these are experienced by all ethnomusicologists during ethnographic interviews and during processes of participant observation. Only rarely, however, have scholars explicitly linked such materials to memory and framed them within processes of historical reconstruction. Ordinarily, we simply move without comment back and forth between eliciting memories and constructing history. An interesting exception is Klaus Wachsmann's Scheme of Investigation for Ethnomusicology (Figure 3), one of the few theoretical models set forth for the study of music history that incorporates memory in its structure and implicitly includes multiple domains of musical encoding. Wachsmann incorporates memory on both his diachronic and synchronic axes and implicitly frames many of the elements on which I have touched. He does not, however, include one of the most important



**Figure 3** Klaus Wachsmann's Scheme of Investigation for Ethnomusicology.

Source: Wachsmann 1971, 96.

aspects of musical memory, namely affect – a dimension fully present in Ruth Cain's remarks, to which we can now turn.

### III. “Meaning a Lot and Making me Feel”

Music carries many types of memories and is most directly implicated in the workings of three different memory systems that are considered to be part of long-term memory: these are episodic memory, which permits the recall of specific incidents; semantic memory, a network of associations and concepts that underpins our knowledge of the world; and procedural memory, the capacity to learn skills and how to do things (Schacter 1996, 134–5).

We have already considered semantic memories embedded within a particular *pizmon* (such as the acrostic and reference to the name Hayyim in the final verse of *Ḥai Hazan*) and have traced some procedural memories involved in a *pizmon*'s performance. However, we have not explicated the domain of episodic memories, which appear to be particularly powerful due to a *pizmon*'s habitual performance at important life-cycle events and rituals. Music is, of course, universally associated with “coming of age” ceremonies and life passages – in this case, *Ḥai Hazan* was dedicated and performed in honour of a wedding. Such events are replete with emotions that play a crucial role as music is encoded and recalled.

Much of Ruth Cain's statement touches explicitly on emotional memories: “I always *feel it* every time I'm sitting in the *shul* and listening to the prayers” is an expression of Ruth's conscious awareness of the emotional impact of a *pizmon*. Her

concluding remark, “This is nothing I’ve thought about a lot. Just a *feeling* you have when you’re there”, articulates her sense that there is a further level of affective content to her memories that moves beyond conscious recall to occupy an unconscious level of musical experience. Ruth’s testimony conveys the wonder of the musical moment and the ways in which the quality of that experience shapes memory. It is not surprising that much of Ruth’s testimony about the *pizmonim* and her experience of the Syrian musical tradition relates to the arena of emotion; one can specifically link her comments to emotions of nostalgia, which in her construction link the past to both the present and the future (Feder 1981).

Isaac Cain was, in contrast, less explicit about the emotional experience of music, although he frequently emphasized that he experienced the *pizmonim*, including *pizmon Hai Hazan*, as “beautiful” and gained pleasure from listeners’ comments about the beauty of the *pizmonim* after he sang. Given Isaac’s halting English, it could be that his many references to “beauty” encompass emotional states of satisfaction and pleasure. Isaac clearly enjoyed talking about the *pizmon* tradition. He moved closest to a level of articulated emotional experience at the point I tentatively offered to end our session after several hours of intense discussion. Isaac quickly replied: “I have nothing to do, you can stay all the time you want. I enjoy to sing, you know, it’s my life. Like if I don’t sing, I feel very bad, really, it’s something special. OK, let me sing that [a “very beautiful” section of the prayers].”

Isaac Cain not only enjoys singing *pizmonim* such as *Hai Hazan* – he reproduces and transforms their melodies to set the words of statutory prayer texts within the synagogue ritual, including the *Kaddish* prayer of sanctification. After performing *pizmon Hai Hazan* during our interview, Isaac noted: “Ḥakham Taboush made it for the wedding of my teacher. Let me show you this, also. I make a *Kaddish* from this *pizmon*, recently, maybe last year. It’s beautiful. It’s in *rāst*. This is it.”

In using the melody of *Hai Hazan* to set a liturgical prayer text repeated within the Sabbath service on many occasions, Isaac demonstrates how he re-embeds the memory of the *pizmon* in a new context with different emotional associations. Multiple settings of beloved *pizmon* melodies in this framework are common among Syrian Jews world-wide and demonstrate the on-going management of important musical memories through processes of re-encodings. Each of these repetitions in turn situates the *pizmon* within new situations – and incorporates additional emotions. When Isaac showed me with pride a notebook listing 124 *Kaddish* prayers set to *pizmon* melodies he learned from Hayyim Tawil, he demonstrated his efforts to secure for future performance the memory of both the melodies and their composer. In this manner as well, Isaac ensured that these melodies from the past would survive into the future.

For the scholar moving between ethnographic testimony and the literature on memory, it is almost as if the carriers of the *pizmon* tradition know intuitively that the brain has multiple memory systems, each devoted to different memory functions (LeDoux 1996, 180). Ruth and Isaac Cain’s testimony demonstrates not only the association of a *pizmon* with different contexts of performance but also the manner in

which embedding the *pizmon* in a new setting (such as in the *Kaddish* prayer) adds new layers of affect. Neuroscientists and others have shown that the emotional arousal that is part of the original encoding experience becomes part of memory of the new experience on both conscious and unconscious levels (LeDoux 1996, 201). The experience of a past memory and associated emotions are in this way converted into a new long-term memory, one that will include the fact that the listener was emotionally aroused the last time he or she remembered the incident. (It is, of course, also possible that a listener could experience an emotional state for reasons he or she does not understand or explicate.)

All of these levels of memory and transformations of affect are part of the on-going life of *pizmon* transmission and performance as they are remembered and articulated by performers (and researchers). At one point, Ruth Cain situated her emotional response in a comparative framework: “You know, all these melodies are pretty . . . . When I go to an Ashkenazic affair,<sup>19</sup> I find their prayers, their melodies, what’s the word, not as happy, sort of, maybe even, sad . . . . And most of the Syrian melodies they sing in *shul* – in our *shul* – the melodies are much happier.”

Current moods and emotions can influence the emotional valence of memories (Robinson 1996, 205). In the case of the ethnographic interview, the ethnographer’s strong interest in testimony may inflect both the memories brought to the fore and the emotions associated with them. In the instance just described in which Ruth described her emotional response to the musical experience in comparative terms, it seems probable that the interview context (and the ethnographer’s familiarity with Ashkenazic music) may have cued this remembrance (Robinson 1996, 206–8). The impact of individual recollections and the power of these narratives on the ethnographer undoubtedly play a role in the historical narratives constructed during and subsequent to interviews. Memories are surely called forth from the past, but “in many respects the past is a moving target” (Robinson 1996, 214).

#### IV. “Keeping it Up, Year after Year”

For the ethnomusicologist, unraveling testimony about memory and affect helps construct a history of transmission and provides clues to conservation of tradition. In the case of the *pizmon*, intentional re-composition of old tunes in new contexts, layer upon layer upon layer, also brings us to a fourth and last level of memory to be examined here.

Transmission of musical memories depends first and foremost on processes of repetition. As Ruth Cain stressed, the *pizmonim* will continue “as long as they keep it up each year, year after year”. At several points in the interview, Ruth emphasized how important it was for Isaac to repeat the tradition in order to convey it to his grandchildren. She also noted that every time Isaac visits New York, young men from the Syrian community like to “get together with my husband and sing along and learn a few things”.

Others in the Syrian community commented on the importance of repetition for processes of memory *and* historical continuity.<sup>20</sup> One of the most important *pizmon* teachers in the New York Syrian community explained in a separate interview:

By continuing every Saturday, now we know it by heart. It's not hard if it's continually said, if it's repeated. Nobody knows that, you know it now, now you teach it to somebody else. Before you didn't know it. It's just like starting or creating something new. (Meyer Kairey, interview, 12 December 1984)

That musical repetition is acknowledged as “creating something new” is not a contradiction. In the Syrian tradition, it is possible to enhance aesthetically each repetition, such as adding an improvised introduction (*layālī*) to renditions of *Ḥai Hazan* or ornamenting subsequent verses in new ways. Isaac Cain's use of the *Ḥai Hazan* melody to set the *Kaddish* prayer provides yet another level of repetition, bringing back a familiar and beloved melody within a new liturgical context. Sound recordings provide a further medium for repetition, ensuring that songs once sung live can be replayed after the performer is no longer able to perform. Indeed, Ruth mentioned that Isaac had recorded a set of cassettes with much of his *pizmon* repertory at the request of his daughters, who want to ensure transmission by playing the recordings for their children. Here we encounter memory as both a kind of knowledge and as a form of action that touches on the “duty to remember” (Ricoeur 1999, 9):

The duty, therefore, is one which concerns the future; it is an imperative directed towards the future, which is exactly the opposite side of the traumatic character of the humiliations and wounds of history. It is a duty, thus, to tell. An example of what is at issue here can be found in Deuteronomy, when the author says “you will tell your children, you will tell them, you will tell them!” (Ricoeur 1999, 10)<sup>21</sup>

In the diasporic settings of modern Syrian Jewish life, far from the historic homeland of Aleppo, Syria, each performance of a song – or just the faintest recollection of a hearing – constitutes a crossroad at which the memory of music is transformed into the scaffolding of history.

## Conclusions

The crossroads between history and memory have been said by historian Yosef Yerushalmi to be held together “in a web of delicate and reciprocal relationships” (Yerushalmi 1989 [1980], xvii). Indeed, we would do well to rethink the place of memory, both in relation to ethnographic materials that convey it and to the construction of history.

Histories are in fact always constructed in dialogue with memory and retain the power to cue memories submerged within themselves. I think back to the structure and content of my book *Let Jasmine Rain Down*, which I quite consciously shaped in its pairings of preludes and chapters to reflect the movement between improvisation

and fixity in the Syrian musical tradition it discussed. I borrowed the title of the book from a poem by Ronny Someck, “Jasmine: Poem on Sandpaper” (1989), that evokes the hybridity of the Syrian Jewish cultural tradition, an Arab-Jewish sensibility that seems very far removed from present-day realities of war and conflict. However, it did not occur to me that the title as well as the book’s form and content would arouse memories on a much more visceral level for some who read it. At a post-publication book talk I gave at a Syrian Jewish event in Los Angeles, held in a Beverly Hills home, I was stunned to walk into a room filled for the evening with jasmine plants, evoking olfactory memories of Aleppo for many in that community. If as an ethnomusicologist I thought I had inscribed a history, something remained that sparked memories, even if imagined, of a different time and place. Clearly, at least some readers (particularly those from the community about which I wrote) read and experienced my book as yet another articulation of memories they shared.

It may well be the case that more than a century of diaspora life, as well as the final separation from Syria since the explosion of the Arab-Israeli conflict in 1948, has reinforced the tendency among Syrian Jews to act as memorists.<sup>22</sup> Recollections of *pizmon* performances, the memories embedded in song texts and tunes, and the rich social networks reinforced through song dedications and performances assume heightened significance as first-hand memories of the historical Syrian homeland recede. For Syrian Jews, and probably for many other diaspora communities as well, transmitting oral memories and embedding them within historical narratives also becomes both a priority and duty lest their history be lost.

While many would agree that musical performance (and discourse about music) constitutes sites of memory,<sup>23</sup> not all historians concur that music, let alone recollections about it, can transmit history. Yerushalmi has written that song (texts) can transmit memory but not history, proposing that “the poetic forms themselves militated against too literal a concern with specific details, while in general the poet could take it for granted that the community knew the facts” (Yerushalmi 1989 [1980], 45–6). He makes this point in a brief discussion of a genre of Jewish penitential (sung) prayers (*selichot*) that he argues are the single most important Jewish religious and literary response to historical catastrophes in the Middle Ages. Yerushalmi’s argument carries weight only if one considers the defining aspects of history to be “specific details” or “chronology”; we have seen how both *pizmonim* and testimony about them contribute actively to constructing such narratives.

The Syrian materials discussed here suggest that memories of and about music carry their own histories and even their own chronologies, but not always in chronological order. Memories of music operate on multiple levels and dimensions simultaneously, constantly circling back on themselves. The convergence of memories of music performance and testimony about music have, in fact, given rise to new historical theories, as we have seen in Inge Skog’s (1998) work realigning Southeast Asian gong chronologies in part by interrogating their representations in memory or in my own research on Ethiopian liturgical musics (Shelemay 1989 [1986]). These

and other studies make clear that history is either a close cousin or a descendant of memories about the past but surely not their ancestor.

Ethnomusicologists must consider themselves able and empowered to study history and to explore fully the ability of music to inform us about the past. Perhaps ethnomusicologists can seek to form their own distinctive historical practices, working from the ethnographic encounter to understand narratives that, like memory, are both individual and collective, and consciously re-created in the present. Working from the moment of musical performance and ethnographic testimony about the domains of memory that encircle performance, musical ethnography places individual experience in dialogue with broader social patterns, resulting in a much better understanding of the past that gives performance shape and meaning. Ethnomusicologists can explore the dialectic between memory and history, looking for the hidden, the silent and the unsuspected – becoming memorists in the full sense of the word. To do otherwise denies the relationship between memory and history and robs ethnomusicology of at least some of its potential power.

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### Notes

- [1] The initial research for this study was undertaken as a team project with my graduate students at New York University and members of the Syrian Jewish community in Brooklyn during the mid-1980s (See Shelemay 1988.). Although this paper draws heavily on interviews gathered in Mexico City during my subsequent research there (as well as in New York and Jerusalem during the early 1990s), the *pizmon* discussed in detail here as well as issues concerning music and memory are broadly shared by other Syrian Jews worldwide.
- [2] Clifford Geertz’s discussion of “history-anthropology relations” (2000, 128, but also see 118–33) frames the relationship of memory and history within relevant disciplinary settings.
- [3] The unexpected role of women in sustaining memories of musical practice despite their absence from spheres of its performance has led me recently into issues relating to music and

- gender. See Shelemay, “The power of silent voices: women in the Syrian Jewish musical tradition” (forthcoming).
- [4] Although literary scholar Stephen J. Greenblatt coined the term “new historicism” as a description of his theoretical move away from (literary) “criticism centered on ‘verbal icons’ toward a criticism centered on cultural artifacts”, he has insisted that the new historicism (which he also calls a type of “cultural poetics”) is neither a doctrine nor well-bounded disciplinary territory (Greenblatt 1990a, 3; see also 1989).
- [5] That I am drawing on a statement by a woman reflects my intention to unsettle institutionalized historical narratives within this tradition that have been constructed almost entirely by men.
- [6] Here my approach differs somewhat from that of Greenblatt, who seeks historical understanding of the pleasure derived from reading literature, such as Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (Greenblatt 1990a, 9–11). In contrast, I seek to read Ruth Cain’s statement as a window on the psychological and aesthetic values that render memories of Syrian Jewish musical transmission and performance central to an historical narrative.
- [7] The concept of memory palace has also been used to describe aspects of narrative and nostalgia in postmodern music composition by Jann Pasler (1993).
- [8] I am indebted to Jody Enders’ discussion of the relationship between memory, rhetoric and delivery in Guillaume de Machaut’s *Remède de Fortune* (Enders 1992). Enders proposes that the longtime division of the medieval lyric corpus into musical and poetic components must give way to an appreciation of the fluidity between speech and song. While Enders explores the way in which speech and song must have interacted within a single medieval performance, I would like to adapt this perspective to the fluid relationship between speech and song within the faculty of memory.
- [9] Here I am not seeking to dispute Charles Seeger’s distinction between linguistic and musical processes, but rather to explore connections between the two. Lawrence M. Zbikowski (1999) employs cognitive models of mental space to map connections between these two conceptual domains. See also Feder (1981).
- [10] I have taken liberties with Barclay’s terminology, which he used to explain the embodiment of traumatic experiences, by transposing it to an ethnographic context.
- [11] I have here applied the roles in “conversational remembering” proposed by Hirst and Manier to the ethnographic interview. In this case, three individuals participated, although this same framework could be applied either to a conventional dyadic ethnographer-interviewee interaction or to exchange within a larger group.
- [12] Draaisma notes that visual aides and then cameras provided popular metaphors for memory from the time of Descartes until the 20th century; as photographic technologies became more sophisticated, related metaphors increasingly constructed memory as precise and realistic, still reverberating in popular notions of “photographic memories” (Draaisma 2000, 119). By the late 19th century, as various recording technologies developed, memory was sometimes discussed in terms of the wax cylinder or the disk (2000, 68). During the second half of the 20th century, computer-inspired and digital metaphors began to pervade and reshape discussions of memory, including concepts such as input, encoding, back-up memory, working memory, storage, search, retrieval and output (2000, 155–7).
- [13] See Benjamin Brinner’s study of musical competence in the Indonesian gamelan tradition, which explores the relationship of individual knowledge to collective conditions and expectations (Brinner 1995).
- [14] For the complete Hebrew text of this *pizmon*, see Shelemay (1998, 265).
- [15] Isaac Cain performed *Hai Hazan* during our interview but his rendition was partial and somewhat distorted by traffic noise in the background. For this reason, I have chosen to transcribe a rendition of the same *pizmon* by members of the Syrian Jewish community in

Brooklyn. That the performance of *maqām rāst* in the Syrian Jewish diaspora has moved very close to major mode is reflected in this transcription.

- [16] *Ḥakham* is an honorary title for a learned man.
- [17] Syrian Jewish emigration was part of a larger outflow of people from the Middle East, in part due to reduced trade in overland trade routes and difficult economic conditions following the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. For a fuller discussion of this process as well as the multiple locales in which Syrian Jews settled, see Shelemay (1998).
- [18] Stuart Feder has characterized songs as “compound aural memories” due to their ability to encode and sustain various types of memories (Feder 1992, 241).
- [19] That is, an event associated with Jews of European descent.
- [20] Anna Maria Busse Berger questions the assumptions of most musicologists that oral transmission of melodic formulas and *contrafacta* in Notre Dame polyphony was improvised; she challenges the assumption that oral traditions collapse processes of composition and performance, depending solely on improvisation (Berger 1998, 241–2). The descriptions of *pizmon* transmission here, which involve the oral transmission of *contrafacta*, clearly incorporate both repetition and a substantial degree of fixity, while allowing room for personal variation and ornamentation.
- [21] While Ricoeur suggests that repetition is an obstacle to remembering (Ricoeur 1999, 6), in the case of musical performance repetition appears to be an integral part of “memory work”.
- [22] I have borrowed this expression from Ulric Neisser (1982, 377), who uses it to describe people with exceptional memories.
- [23] Here I am drawing on the terminology proposed by Pierre Nora (1989).

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