




REVIEW: BOOK

## Peculiar Attunements: How Affect Theory Turned Musical

Roger Mathew Grant

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Authority emanates from Roger Mathew Grant's *Peculiar Attunements: How Affect Theory Turned Musical*. From the back cover, readers learn that the monograph has garnered praise from leading literary critic Sianne Ngai and that Carolyn Abbate refers to it as a 'tour-de-force'. In the course of four chapters on operatic and instrumental music, *Peculiar Attunements* traces a central transformation in musical aesthetics, all while claiming to provide a new history of affect that places music at the centre of its discussion. First, Grant shows how early-modern and eighteenth-century music critics replaced the doctrine of mimesis – in which artworks produce human affects by imitating worldly things – with a concept that privileged an understanding of the individual body's capacity to apprehend indeterminate reverberations. This is what Grant calls the notion of attunement. Second, the book discusses the persistence of eighteenth-century modes of musical attunement in affect theory today. Grant thus formulates his thesis as a critique, one that traces 'the structure of events in intellectual history that created these parallel historical turns away from representation and toward affect' (23). A self-avowed work of intellectual history, *Peculiar Attunements* surveys a combination of sources in aesthetic theory, canonical and otherwise, and deliberately avoids the use of musical examples so as to broaden its potential audience.

Chapter 1 opens with a study of musical mimesis in operas by Lully, Purcell and Handel in conjunction with contemporaneous criticism. Grant shows that composers and listeners apprehended musical signs within a universalizing system of representation, one relying on codes and conventions that linked a range of musical figurations with particular affective states. Mimetic procedures, he argues, afforded critics and listeners the 'incredibly transformational affective power that was morally improving and in accordance with the highest standards for art' (42). Chapter 2, which appeared in 2017 as an article in *Critical Inquiry*, turns to a famous Italian buffa troupe's performances of comic opera in Paris. Grant argues here that comic opera functioned as a metacritique of serious French opera by placing emphasis on the mimetic modes of representation that defined it. Much of Pergolesi's *La serva padrona* (1733), for instance, employs exaggerated mimetic figurations that provide additional information not included in, or conveyed by, the text. As composers 'began to use poetry and music as autonomous signifying systems' (62), Grant suggests, they transformed textual meaning – at times parodying it, at other times subverting it. In a counterintuitive argument that also forms one of the book's most original moments, Grant locates the burgeoning notion of musical autonomy in music's newly found independence from text (and in comic opera, of all places), arguing that 'extreme mimesis in this music was no longer mimetic – it was instead directly affective' (62).

Startled by comic opera's mimetic excess, critics of the mid-eighteenth century expressed some uncertainty about the ways in which instrumental music signified. Chapter 3 addresses this ambiguity in keyboard music, from François Couperin's 'L'Amphibie', from his *Pièces de*

*Clavecin* (book 4, *ordre* 24; 1730), to Mozart's Sonata in F major K332 (1784). Drawing on Wye Jamison Allanbrook's critical deployment of polyps and chameleon-like figures, Grant aptly describes these works' resistance to signification as 'amphibious'— their ability to inhabit different terrains by presenting contrasting musical styles in quick succession betrayed both stylistic hybridity and inconsistency. For him, their amphibious nature encapsulates the problem of signification that instrumental music of this time posed, a problem that confused some critics at first before leading to arguments that proposed such music as intrinsically bound to sensation and to a non-discursive form of fleshliness. From this point onwards, Grant abstains from discussions of mimesis, having rightly reminded readers of its universalizing effects. Nevertheless, I would have appreciated a few words on how mimesis calls attention not only to universality, but also to the collective, thus pointing to how particular social groups inhabit common worlds, allowing them to engage in everyday cultural practices and modes of communication and sociability. (On this topic see in particular Wye Jamison Allanbrook, *The Secular Commedia: Comic Mimesis in Late Eighteenth-Century Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 1–40.)

In the book's final chapter, Grant contends that music criticism from the final decades of the eighteenth century points to a watershed moment in the history of affect. Wackenroder was one among many to identify modes of listening that set him in a state of attunement (he called this 'Stimmung'), which indicated an interior experience generated by unspecified vibrational transmissions and was characterized by a sense of immediacy (123). Although *Stimmung* is translated here as 'attunement', its alternative renderings as 'mood' and 'atmosphere' leave readers wishing for extended commentary on this sonically inflected translation, one that forms the book's conceptual anchor. Still, and as Grant argues persuasively in a short but hefty Coda, accounts of musical experiences such as Wackenroder's are historical antecedents of present-day theories of affect that likewise detach attunement from representational specificity and instead locate it inside the purportedly unique experience of the listening subject.

Hardly the first piece in music scholarship to trace a history of affect, *Peculiar Attunements* looks back to Martha Feldman's essay 'Music and the Order of the Passions' (published in Richard Meyer's edited collection *Representing the Passions: Histories, Bodies, Visions* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2003), 37–67), which Grant mentions in passing (9), but in fact exerts great influence on his history of affect. As early as this essay, Feldman had sketched a historical trajectory that attended to changing attitudes towards the affects (or the passions, as she calls them), culminating in the eighteenth-century valuation and subsequent sedimentation of individual subjectivity. Feldman calls this an outward orientation towards 'expression'; Grant refers to it as an inward turn to attunement. Like Feldman, Grant understands affects as historically situated and recognizes their ability to re-emerge through the course of history. In doing so, he reformulates her claim in which an early-modern sense of 'wonder came back in the darker guise of the sublime' (Feldman, 'Music and the Order of the Passions', 37) to argue that a romantic attunement returned in the guise of the non-representational resonances so central to contemporary affect theory. But although Feldman examines how the passions have been 'fitfully' reconceptualized through time (as if to echo the historical 'fits and spells' that define Foucault's genealogical method), Grant rehabilitates Horkheimer and Adorno's 'dialectics of Enlightenment' between faith and pure insight. Given Grant's historical trajectory, he argues that we can best understand affect dialectically: as that which can both provide a rational explanation for the power of the sign and emerge in opposition to rationality and signification (25).

This historical trajectory sets numerous expectations. In quoting affect theorist Stephen Ahern, for instance, Grant offers to 'read affect theory through the age of sensibility' (3). And yet I was struck by an absence of sources and scholarship pertaining to eighteenth-century understandings of sensibility. Matthew Head's discussion of C. P. E. Bach's keyboard fantasias ('C. P. E. Bach "In Tormentis": Gout Pain and Body Language in the Fantasia in A Major, H278 (1782)', *Eighteenth-Century Music* 13/2 (2016), 211–234) might have proved fruitful, for instance. Head,

after all, examines instrumental fantasias that were central to the culture of sensibility to offer yet another mode of dialectical thinking, one that shows how they encapsulated a productive tension between sensation and the absolute: the seemingly non-representational musical figurations long associated with improvisation were generated by (and thus returned to) the body of the improviser. For Head, the idea of an eighteenth-century turn towards sensation and a concomitant rupture with mimesis and representation is historically inaccurate. Such a turn lies at the centre of Grant's argument and, by engaging with arguments such as this, Grant could have both broadened the book's archival scope and encouraged further scholarly dialogue regarding the dialectical workings of affect in solo keyboard repertoires.

At the same time, *Peculiar Attunements* concludes somewhat as music scholars, at least, might expect: with the well-known actors in the history of musical Romanticism and traditional musical historiography. I was also struck, for instance, by Grant's brief discussion of Beethoven scholarship as he moves rapidly (dare I say amphibiously?) from the writings of Deirdre Loughridge to those of Carl Dahlhaus. The relevant passage quotes a short clause from the former's *Haydn's Sunrise, Beethoven's Shadow* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), which suggests that Hoffmann's oft-cited review of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony propelled 'an experience of the spirit world as real, alien, and ever ready to return' (109). While for Grant, mention of a spirit world reveals an eighteenth-century rejection of representation, Loughridge was in fact arguing that the possibility of encounters with the spirit world led to an ongoing critical insistence on reason. Audiences might have seen ghosts via optical illusions and heard their sound effects in phantasmagoria shows, but the artificiality of these displays was always unveiled at the end so as to return to earthly circumstances – to pure insight rather than faith. When placed against Loughridge's bottom-up materialist critique, Grant's argument that Hoffmann represents a view in which 'affect retreated to the interiors of listening subjects and took on characteristics associated with the ineffable' (110) renders the book vulnerable to criticism – to claims that it repeats the romantic narrative it is purporting to critique. The question remains: is Grant's a familiar narrative with a new name?

One of the great merits of *Peculiar Attunements* lies in its critique of affect theorists' reformulation of eighteenth-century understandings of attunement as vibration and resonance. Grant shows that such free-floating, catch-all sonic discourse can buttress affect theorists' 'sense-certainty' – the Hegelian notion mobilized here to critique arguments that turn to affected subjects at the expense of the particular aesthetic objects that engender affective states in the first place. He makes the danger of these discourses clear: they treat the transmission of affect that take place from object to subject as immediate, rather than mediated, and thus risk evading questions about representation and signification. Although Grant dedicates careful attention to this crucial point, one might at times have wished for a more extensive, blow-by-blow account of one or two studies in affect theory. A short passage mentioning Eve Sedgwick's characterization of affect as a 'free radical' and Sara Ahmed's description of it as that which 'sticks' forms a case in point (132). Grant is rightly suspicious of floating signifiers, but the passage also betrays some of the challenges that affect theories present us with. For Sedgwick, after all, the figure of the free radical points to how affect can alter not only meaning, but also the sensorium, one's perceptions of identity and relations with others. And affective stickiness for Ahmed suggests that affect can form affinity groups and allow for the possibility of political activity. 'How we feel about others is what aligns us with a collective', she writes, and in so doing aligns the corporeal transmission of affect not with the 'sense-certainty' Grant is critiquing, but with sociability. (See Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 54, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 62).

Still, by drawing attention to the persistence of a generalized sonic discourse in affect theory, *Peculiar Attunements* treads the path for future examinations of how a sound-inflected lexicon is deployed in works of affect theory and in the humanities more broadly. This could involve

rethinking a number of well-worn links between noise and resistance, silence and oppression, and listening and empathy. Closer to home, the book urges music scholars to think hard about the consequences of vibrational ontologies as they circle back to their field – about those arguments that recognize vibration as the shared ground for life and matter (I am thinking, for instance, of Nina Sun Eidsheim's *Sensing Sound: Singing and Listening as Vibrational Practice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015)). In the end, maybe the most important insight of *Peculiar Attunements* is that the all-too-present music-metaphorical discourse saturating standard works of affect theory carries a history with it, a history that may be traced to developments taking place in music criticism throughout the long eighteenth century. Grant's much-needed historicizing of this discourse may unsettle those theorists who consider affect as something immediate and beyond signification. In Grant's history of affective attunements, musical affect is nothing if not historical, and it is bound up with dangerous returns.

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