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Music Theory's Visceral Turn: A Review of Roger Matthew Grant, *Peculiar Attunements: How Affect Theory Turned Musical* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020)

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[1] "Affect is everywhere! Everyone is talking about it. It's in this room, it's in our bodies." So exclaimed Bettina Varwig at the beginning of her paper "Early Eighteenth-Century (Musical) Bodies and Affects: A Reappraisal" at the 2019 Annual Meeting of the American Musicological Society. She is right: *affect* refers to the experience of feeling, emotion, or mood, and *affect theory*, the broad organization and categorization of these experiences, has seen a renaissance in the humanities and social sciences over the past decade. Varwig pointed out that the recent return to studying affect among humanists and social scientists is peculiar; after all, musicians have been talking about it for hundreds of years, if not longer. Indeed, the so-called "doctrine of affections" had been an integral part of describing music in the eighteenth century, and it was discussed in twentieth-century scholarship by Willi Apel (1972), Manfred Bukofzer (1947), and others. As a paradigm for describing the aesthetic interaction between musical objects, subjects, and their representations, the concept of affect grounds musical experience and gives name to the corporeal, the non-discursive, and the breathtaking—even speechless—responses associated with it. Work on the topic came to a halt in the 1980s, likely because it failed, owing to its lack of cohesion, to be codified into a true doctrine (Buelow 1983). Its resurgence in our current intellectual moment forms part of an ongoing "visceral turn" (an alternative to our traditional orientation toward the linguistic) in the humanities and social sciences, and thus, as Varwig's title suggests, calls for a related reappraisal of the body's relationship to music.

[2] Whether interest in affect has reached its peak or if its peak is still yet to come, future critical discourse surrounding affect will owe much to the work of Roger Mathew Grant and his recently published book, *Peculiar Attunements: How Affect Theory Turned Musical*. *Peculiar Attunements*

provides a detailed historiographic study of the long eighteenth century's process of coming to terms with the interstice between music theory and aesthetics. Moreover, by treating the historical lineage of discourses surrounding affect as a living tradition, the book draws the recent return to affect theory among humanists and social scientists into conversation with the *Affektenlehre* of eighteenth-century music theory. This tactic, Grant suggests in the introduction, might seem odd on the surface. Today, affect is said to be some kind of corporeal, immediate, and non-discursive experience, which "relate[s] to conditions of feeling that cannot be adequately captured [with linguistic signs]" (1). By contrast, the affects—or "passions," as they were frequently called—were thought by eighteenth-century writers to act as the very signs that could be appealed to in order to explain the impact of aesthetic objects. Yet, there were aesthetic debates, contradictory historical documents, and provocative music-theoretical developments at the heart of eighteenth-century musical life that effected a transformation within aesthetic theory. These activities coalesced into a new theory of "affective attunement" (hence, *Peculiar Attunements*). Offering a genealogical critique of affect—a clear nod to Ruth Leys's recent monograph, *The Ascent of Affect: Genealogy and Critique* (2017)—the book demonstrates how much of contemporary affect theory today was made possible by musical debates of the eighteenth century.

[3] Chapter 1, "Eighteenth-Century Opera and the Mimetic *Affektenlehre*," traces the early modern era's reliance upon and difficulties with *mimesis*. Focusing on the *tragédie en musique* and the *dramma per musica*, particularly the reception history of Jean-Baptiste Lully's celebrated *Armide* (1686), the chapter uncovers the "mimetic *Affektenlehre*," which Grant defines as "a set of music theory documents that attempted to capture the technical basis of [opera poetics] in musical terms" (33). Seventeenth-century opera composers, still very much experimenting with the capabilities of the art form itself, often used stock musical gestures and imitative figures—i.e., "topics" (*topoi*), such as horn calls and lamenting basslines—that created links with the text. Grant's recounting of the mimetic *Affektenlehre* unfolds diachronically, investigating the manner in which the "codes and conventions"—or "signs"—of early modern opera developed over time. As these conventions became established, they were discussed and argued over in contemporaneous theoretical and aesthetic writings. By bringing opposing discussions of Italian *dramma per musica* and the French *tragédie en musique* under scrutiny, Grant illuminates the power of mimesis: "music could be said to hold the power to assist in mimesis," he explains. "It could paint individual words, it could invoke general images or moods—which would in turn create affects in listeners—or it could imitate the affects themselves" (40). One hears, for example, Armide's cries over Renaud, and the music, through its imitative capacity, further communicates her fury, her guile, and her own passionate state. The harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic gestures of this music made the emotional meaning of its poetic text intelligible for operagoers.

[4] However, some theorists chastised the doctrine, disparaging the nomenclature of their contemporaries as well as the mimetic ideology that authorized it. This critique had a parallel in music composition as the new genre of comic opera emerged simultaneously with the *Affektenlehre*. Chapter 2, "Comic Opera: Mimesis Exploded,"[(1)] explores how comic opera became a "metatheatrical critique" of operatic praxis, which it did by mocking and parodying the mimetic doctrine (62). Arguing against the trend in historical studies to read eighteenth-century mimetic theory as continuous (most notably Allanbrook 2014 and 1983), Grant demonstrates how comic opera instead moved away from the doctrine of imitation. Writers of the time—Élie-Catherine Fréron and Denis Diderot among them—attempted "to displace mimesis altogether in favor of an explanatory framework that favored the corporeal and material dimensions of musical listening" (76). No longer was music propelling the text exegetically; instead, it was alleged to affect the physical body through a process of attunement. Drawing upon music theory, music criticism, the medical humanities, and the Enlightenment's emphasis on sensory experience, Chapter 2 shows how comic opera relied upon the tropes of the mimetic *Affektenlehre* to explore what it meant for musical sounds to carry meaning. Eighteenth-century comic opera challenged the codes and conventions of serious opera while at the same time expanding their function, which forced audiences and commentators alike to reevaluate how affect reached listeners. In directing attention to affective transmission, music's materiality, and neurological metaphors (more on this below), the eighteenth century began to rethink the body in terms of its sympathetic resonance.

[5] For eighteenth-century commentators, the emphasis placed upon affective resonance shaped the emergence of the "notional autonomy" of music (85). Chapter 3, "'Sonate, que me veux tu?' and Other Dilemmas of Instrumental Music," confronts this development through an investigation of the debates surrounding eighteenth-century instrumental music. The capacity for instrumental music to move listeners emotionally posed a major problem for most critics. Generally speaking, instrumental music was thought to be meaningless, compelling the now-famous question, "sonata, what do you want from me?"(2) Perceived by some to provide a "mere corporeal tickle" (91), instrumental music was compared to "a performing body without a soul" because listening to non-vocal music "was like witnessing the actions of a human without interior content" (101). Most critics viewed instrumental music as directed toward and written for the body, lacking any means to reach the still-separated Cartesian mind. Instrumental music, as d'Alembert famously quipped in the "Discours préliminaire," was nothing but noise, and therefore could not speak to the intellect.(3) By contrast, others began to theorize that instrumental music's nature made it ideal for connecting the mind and the body. Borrowing from Amy Cimini (2011), Grant takes stock of the "cryptodualist" movement, one that arose from eighteenth-century materialism's increasing difficulty in separating body and soul, as well as from its struggles with the then-prevailing doctrine of mimesis. Music's ability to facilitate a union between exterior sound and interior emotion independent of text was beginning to take shape. Under the aegis of cryptodualism, theorists and critics shined light on music's affective power—namely, the ways in which music spoke immediately to the heart without a need to address the mind. In doing so, these theorists no longer described music as an imitation of nature, but, rather, as *nature itself*. Music—especially instrumental music—was held to have a special relationship with the corporeal interior of its listeners, a relationship that gave this music the unique ability to arouse distinctive affective experiences.

[6] Stripped of language, mimesis, and signification altogether, music's relationship to its auditor underwent a transformation, the effects of which we still feel today. Chapter 4, "The Attunement *Affektenlehre*," brings this transformation to the fore. Like his eighteenth-century interlocutors, Grant relates the corporeal sensation of musical tones to sympathetic resonance, or "affective attunement." Late eighteenth-century descriptions of attunement gravitate towards the immediate, nonrepresentational, and nondiscursive aspects of musical experience, with theorists advocating for a purely corporeal response to music's emotional dimensions. Throughout the latter half of the eighteenth century, several philosophers (including Hume, Diderot, Kant, and Sulzer) began to articulate a theory of the body as an intrinsically *musical* entity: as a hybrid of anatomy and organology, half human, half instrument. The figure of the vibrating or oscillating string (known generally as *l'homme clavicein* or the human harpsichord) was enlisted by eighteenth-century critics to explain how one experiences the external world. Grant's study uncovers how later-eighteenth-century thinkers thought about the attuned body's role in affective response: internal fibers and external sounds resonate in kind to provoke emotional response. In focusing on the immediate aesthetic force of music and the reverberating nerves that its energy provokes, the attunement *Affektenlehre* "displace[s] its older mimetic predecessor and the general theory of mimesis along with it" (122). Theorists and aestheticians, avoiding the distinctive aesthetic properties of affecting objects, instead fixed their collective attention on the aural, nervous body—the affected subject.

[7] The book's "Coda" describes the attunement *Affektenlehre* as "the largest missing piece in the vital history of musical affect theories" on the grounds that it both "most closely corresponds to twenty-first-century theories of affect" (15, see also 131) and is also contemporary affect theory's earliest antecedent. Moreover, there are distinctly musical aspects to contemporary affect theory, which in some ways restages the complex and dynamic debates that went on in historical music theories. By highlighting passages from Alexander Cho (2015), William Connolly (2011), Theresa Brennan (2004), and others—many of which do not directly engage with music—Grant interweaves modern affect theory's musical, sonic, and vibrational metaphors with their eighteenth-century counterparts. He thus stitches together two histories—one musical, the other affective—into a continuity, showing, as his subtitle states, how affect theory "turned" musical. Grant endeavors, then, to restore diachronicity to affect theory, to draw the critical discourse surrounding affect into dialogue with the musical objects that generate affect in subjects, and to underscore music theory and affect theory's parallel evolution into the present moment (136–142).

[8] Although Grant's book is directed towards humanists and social scientists explicitly, it contains an implicit call to action for music scholars as well. Some, in fact, are already heeding it, as there has been an ongoing reappraisal of musical affect in both musicology and music theory. Recent work by Varwig (2018; 2020), Charles Dill (2017), Veit Erlmann (2010, 111–149), Patrik Juslin (2019), Cynthia Verba (2015), and Kovaciny (2018; 2019) underscores how eighteenth-century writers and musicians thought musical objects could provoke emotional response in listeners. Some of these scholars participate in what Grant calls the mimetic *Affektenlehre*, others in the domain of affective attunement, and a few fall in between into areas akin to the cryptodualist model. Nevertheless, each author uses music (theory) to study affect and its objects. Being sensitive to the shared objects of affect theory and music theory allows us to see their common origin and, ultimately, their conjoined history. Or, as Joel Lester writes in his recent essay, "On Reading Music Theories from the Past," "knowing the contexts in which ideas arose and evolved is absolutely essential if we are to regard the written record of past eras as something more than *bon mots*, of early (and often clumsy) anticipations of modern ideas, or of odd notions" (Lester 2016, 218).[4] *Peculiar Attunements* not only offers new insights into eighteenth-century accounts of musical affect, but also provides resources for contemporary engagement with these historical discourses.

[9] Allow me to demonstrate both of these virtues through an analytical digression. An important aspect of Grant's narrative is the eighteenth-century debate, known as the *querelle des bouffons*, that pitted Italian *opera buffa* against the tradition of French *tragédie lyrique*. Named after the travelling troupe of comic actors known as *buffoni*, this war of words divided into two camps: the Queen's corner (fans of Italian comedy) and the King's corner (supporters of French tragedy). The *querelle*, which had an obvious geopolitical subtext, probed the aesthetics of music in general and assessed the value of opera in particular. Numerous critics tossed their hats into the ring. Goaded by Diderot's 1753 pamphlet—itself a response to two earlier critiques—Rousseau penned the *Lettre sur la musique françoise* ([1753] 1998), attacking French music for its banality. Rameau responded in his *Observations sur notre instinct pour la musique* (1754). The piece cited by both Rousseau and Rameau was Jean-Baptiste Lully's "Enfin, il est en ma puissance" from *Armide* (1686), a cornerstone of French tragic opera.[5] Was this scene, as Rousseau claimed, a trite exercise in an outdated operatic style that failed to depict emotion? Or was it, as Rameau contended, the pinnacle of musical expression?

[10] Rousseau believed the singer's trills, the music's strange harmonic modulations, and even the eventual return to the home key were incongruous with the trepidation and emotional upheaval communicated by Armide's words. In a blow-by-blow critique of the monologue, Rousseau argues that Lully's music and Quinault's text were incompatible: when the "Poet" wrote "Achevons . . . Je frémis. Vengeons-nous . . . Je soupire [End it . . . I tremble. Avenge myself . . . I sigh]," the "Musician" composed music that said, "Achevons, achevons. Vengeons-nous, vengeons-nous [End it, end it. Avenge myself, avenge myself]" (Rousseau [1753] 1998, 171–172). Simply put, Lully failed to depict Armide's shifting, ambivalent attitudes. Rameau, by contrast, detected no such discrepancy. Referencing another moment in the opera, Rameau interprets the local modulation from G major to C major—represented by his fundamental bass analysis in the first system of **Example 1**—as a legitimate representation of the character's inner turmoil. The harmonic motion at this moment, which moves from "Ton de Sol" to "Ton d'Ut," "seems to make [Armide] pronounce [her] reflection with a kind of humiliation, of mortification, as if in a moment of fear that she will not be able to conquer [Renaud]" (Rameau 1754, 55; Jacobi 1967–72, 3:294). Rameau underscores the effect of the subdominant here by creating counterfactual settings that modulate to the dominant instead—that is, from G to D major ("Ton de Sol" to "Ton de Re"). In Rameau's hearing, these alternate settings communicate different emotional cues—in fact, the hypothetical move to the dominant would portray her as heroic instead.[6]

[11] What mattered for Rousseau and Rameau was not only what the piece signified—be it Armide's emotional torment or her indifference to her own fragile psyche—but how it went about trying to do so. It should surprise no one familiar with their writings that both Rousseau and Rameau relied upon music's capacity to act physically upon the body and thus the soul. In the posthumously published *Essai sur l'origine des langues* (written in close proximity to the *Lettre sur la musique françoise*), Rousseau writes that musical tones, as signs of the passions, "penetrate the very

depths of the heart," which in turn "cause us to *feel what we hear*" (Rousseau [1781] 1986, 243 [my emphasis]). Rameau evokes similar imagery throughout his career, noting how music's primary aim should be to evoke passionate responses in its listeners. Rameau's most forceful articulation of this idea appears in response to Rousseau's attack on Lully. In defense of French tragedy, Rameau explains how one "feels" what they hear:

> If comparisons were to be made [between the dominant and subdominant], would it not be natural to attribute to joy that crowd of descendants [i.e., the first five overtones] offer, whose resonance indicates their existence? [. . .] And by the opposite reasoning, would we not attribute to regrets, to tears, etc. to [the symmetrical inversion, below the fundamental, of the overtones], whose mournful silence is awoken only by their division [into aliquot parts sounding] at the unison with the sounding body that makes me quiver [i.e., vibrate sympathetically] . . . ? (Rameau 1754, 52–54; Jacobi 1967–72, 3:292–293).

For Rameau, harmony's resonance is alone responsible for generating affect. Or to put it another way, the "sounding body" stirs the reverberating, affective listening body.

[12] We can also apply this model to Rameau's compositional process. Consider, for example, Télaïre's mournful lament from Rameau's *Castor et Pollux* (1737, rev. 1754), the opera that "provided the decisive victory for French music in the *querelle des bouffons*" (Dill 1993, 93). Throughout the chapter on musical expression in his *Code de musique pratique* (1760), Rameau refines his remarks from the *Observations*, advancing an aesthetic theory that is based upon the sympathetic resonance between the objective, fixed *corps sonore* and the subjective, fluid soul. He comes to understand listeners as "passively harmonic bodies" (*corps passivement harmoniques*) that link exterior sensation to internal emotion. While doing so, Rameau draws our attention to "Tristes apprêts" and to Télaïre's heart-wrenching monologue after her lover's funeral:

> In wanting to leave the first, natural state [i.e., the key of C], it can only be by presenting a tone that has refused its sentiment, and it is precisely F, a stranger to C. Its harmony is only to be heard after that of the tonic C, so as to surprise us until we throw ourselves into a kind of sadness, as the soul, deprived of its point of support, is in control until it is returned to it, though it is necessary to return to it promptly; so I have not failed to recommend short phrases in the tone of the fourth, which is the fifth below [the tonic]. Do we not feel naturally struck with the regret of the Actress who sings "tristes apprêts" in the opera *Castor et Pollux* at the moment the fifth below enters (which is the F that follows C on the last syllable)? and do we not feel a little relieved when C immediately returns to the last syllable of these other words, "pâles flambeux," without there nevertheless remaining in us some vestiges of the first impression of **Example 2** (*a* and *b*)? (Rameau 1760, 167–168; Jacobi 1967–72, 4:191–192)

[13] The C–F / F–C melodic line that descends through the inverted overtone series informs the music's affective register. Rameau asserts that this musical gesture's expressivity is an attribute of the *corps sonore*. Hidden within the harmonic progression[(7)] lies the melodic unfolding of the subdominant harmony, a fact that can be adduced to support Rameau's general claim that "harmony alone is responsible for stirring the passions, whereas melody draws its strength only from this source" (Rameau 1754, vi-vii; Jacobi 1967–72, 3: 260-261). To drive the point home, Rameau also composes an "alternative" example (marked as c in Example 2) with different text ("Rejouïssons nous, soyens contens" [Let us rejoice and be content]). Indeed, the altered vocal line articulates the so-called "natural division" of the *corps sonore* (i.e., C–G / G–C) over a tonic pedal. "If we substitute [what is labelled] *c* over G for [what is labelled] *a* over F," he notes, "we will soon feel the difference between them. The soul will remain there for that time in its same state—nothing will stir it. All [the diverse textual allusions] will become indifferent to us if the same tone subsists" (Rameau 1760, 168; Jacobi 1967–72, 4:192). According to Rameau's theory, as long as the music expresses either a tonic or dominant—that which is "natural" to the *corps sonore*'s overtone series—the soul of the listener (and even perhaps also the singer) will remain unmoved. "Let us not forget," writes Rameau, "that the expression of a sentiment, and above all of the passions, produces no effect except by altering the measure & changing the tone. *An expressive moment demands a new*

tone. The best art depends not only on the composer's feeling, but also on the choice one has to make between sharps or flats [i.e., between dominant and subdominant] *relative to the greater or lesser joy or sadness one is concerned with expressing*" (1760, 170; Jacobi 1967–72, 4:194 [my emphasis]). It is only by having the music go to the subdominant that the composer can cause the body's fibers to become de-tuned to the *corps sonore*'s emotional resonance, allowing the audience to experience emotions akin to those of the characters on stage.

[14] I both hear, and to a certain degree *feel*, what Rameau is talking about—as did many in Rameau's time. Michel-Paul Guy de Chabanon, a partisan of of Rameau's music theory and a primary figure in Grant's fourth chapter, describes Télaïre's monologue as "sending chills to the spectators," "deceiving us on our very sensations," and sending shivers down our spine (Chabanon 1772, 167), all because of its "skillful use of harmony" (Chabanon 1764, 36). Diderot, too, offers high praise, focusing on the music's ability to express the character's emotions independent of the text: "I would ask if words are needed in the monologue of Télaïre in the first act of *Castor et Pollux* in order to feel the sad and dismal situation of a bewildered lover?" (Diderot [1743] 1974–75, 382). Télaïre's grief over the death of Castor, it would seem, provokes in the audience a physical response to its harmony, which communicates Télaïre's destabilized state of feeling in the process. We are listening to her body's response to sadness; the melody, as governed by the sounding body, lays bare Télaïre's emotions for us to feel in kind. In each instance, Rameau, Chabanon, and Diderot reorient their attention to the object that generates affective response.

[15] To attend to these affective responses is to uncover what fascinated eighteenth-century theorists: those features of musical experience that stood outside the mimetic taxonomy of the other arts. By examining historical views of comic opera, instrumental music, and their role in usurping the long-held doctrine of imitation, Grant reorients our attention to what concerned our eighteenth-century counterparts—namely, how exactly music could influence the sensorium. This reorientation invites us to navigate through the aesthetic possibilities of music as "living bodies" (Husserl [1913] 2012; see also Ahmed 2006, 25–64). In this way, the music-theoretical object—the score, the harmonic progression, and the like—becomes an initial point of inquiry, and music theory and analysis can thus be recast as "symptoms" of the affected subject (18), as a means of fine-tuning the lived experience of the auditor.

[16] What I'm suggesting, then, is directly tied to Grant's appeal to reimagine the history of music theory as a history of musical experience and as a theory of the visceral and affective. This new critical vocabulary, which emphasizes phenomenology over phenomenon, allows us, as Brian Hyer once put it, "to hear in the music what earlier audiences might have heard," to recover a mode of hearing that has since "become muffled, fallen silent, or been forgotten over historical time" (1996, 93). *Peculiar Attunements* seeks to remember and recover these hearings, and to recognize their echoes within our own auditory culture. "To listen again, artfully, to affect theory's torrid history," Grant concludes, "is to hear its distant musical antecedents and to heed their lessons" (142). For both past and present, there is still listening to be done and many more lessons to learn.

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Footnotes

1. An early version of this chapter appears as Grant 2017.
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2. "Sonate, que me veux tu?" allegedly stems from the French *philosophe* Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle. It is quoted with this attribution at the end of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's article "Sonate" in the *Encyclopédie* (D'Alembert and Diderot 1751, 15:348), and reappears in Rousseau's *Dictionnaire de Musique* (Rousseau 1768, 452). (However, it has garnered notoriety from a different French musician, Pierre Boulez, specifically his essay that appeared in *Perspectives of New Music* [Boulez 1963].) The phrase has since found use numerous times in music studies. As but one example, I draw your attention to Robert Gjerdingen's "Partimento, que me veux tu?" (2007).
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3. Indeed, d'Alembert would later liken the symphony to "a German discourse spoken before someone who only understands French" (D'Alembert 1887, 155). Cited in Grant 2018, 41.
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4. This theme is reminiscent of Ian Hacking's (2002) essay on historicism and of Nathan Martin's (2019) application of Hacking's conceptual framework to the history of music theory.
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5. This was not a coincidence. In his 1753 pamphlet, "Au petit prophète de Boehmischbroda [et] au grand prophète Monet," Diderot challenges his readers to critique this particular scene (among others) against Domènec Terradella's *Sesostri* (1751).
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6. For more on Rameau's analytical alterations in this passage and others, see Verba 1973. See also Martin 2014.
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7. Though the fundamental bass here moves from C to D, the bass progression as a whole moves from the tonic to the subdominant then to the dominant, eventually returning to the tonic.
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