

# “When Your Archive Is Telling You Something, You Should Pay Attention to It”

An Interview with Dr. Roger Mathew Grant

By Brian Fairley (New York University)

Roger Mathew Grant, associate professor of music at Wesleyan University, is a music theorist and historian, with special focus on eighteenth-century music, Enlightenment aesthetics, and early modern science. His forthcoming book, *Peculiar Attunements: How Affect Theory Turned Musical* (Fordham University Press, 2020), turns to eighteenth-century debates in music theory and aesthetics to reveal a moment of crisis strikingly similar to the one that produced a surge in affect theory in the 1990s. Some of the book’s key points, especially regarding the concept of the *Affektenlehre* as understood in Baroque music theory, appear in a recent article in *Representations* (Grant 2018). The following interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.

**BF:** When you started this project, how did you see affect theory being used in music studies?

**RMG:** The condition that I observed at the time—let’s say 2014 or so—was that music scholars were getting interested in affect theory, but primarily, as music scholars tend to do, they were trying to borrow from affect theory to explain music. Which is fantastic and extremely important, and I’m very invested in it. But it also seemed to me that we, as music scholars, had this huge trove of documents about affect theory that basically only we have the skills to interpret and explain to other people interested in affect theory. And so that seemed to me like a major missed opportunity.



Roger Mathew Grant (L) and Brian Fairley

It also seemed to me that people who had written about affect theory before—people like Sianne Ngai (2005, 2012) and Lauren Berlant (2011), others like Rei Terada (2001), and even Brian Massumi (2002) himself—were at least glancingly aware of the existence of something called the *Affektenlehre*, but more or less had included one or two sentences about it that had been lifted from the [*New*] *Grove Dictionary [of Music and Musicians]*. Because they weren’t going to read those documents—I mean, they don’t have the skills to interpret them. Not only was this a missed opportunity, but it was almost, dare I say, a kind of responsibility for people who can interpret those documents to explain them to people interested in affect theory, because nobody else is going to do that. If the history of music theory has a moment to dust off its lapels and shine for the rest of the humanities, maybe this is it.

**BF:** Can you elaborate on the *Affektenlehre*, and then trace your book’s argument from there?

**RMG:** The *Affektenlehre* is a kind of movement within historical music theory, in which composers, theorists, and critics came to a very unstable consensus that music has the power to signify—to act as a sign—and to communicate, independently of any text that might accompany it. The term *Affektenlehre* itself comes to us from early twentieth century German musicology, and there was at one time a belief that in the Baroque era—the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries—this consensus was largely agreed upon by theorists, critics, and composers, and that one could therefore identify precisely those key signatures, meters, styles, or rhythmic

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tones were “saying.” There was an idea of Baroque opera that it presented, you know, a series of caricatured affects paraded one after the next. That’s from Joseph Kerman, in *Opera as Drama* ([1956] 1988, 49). In the same context, he called that era of opera the “dark ages.” In the 1980s, George Buelow (1984) examined the inconsistencies among the theoretical treatises and the musical compositions themselves, and declared that, because of all of these contradictions—because no uniform doctrine had ever really emerged about affect in the eighteenth century—that we really shouldn’t continue to investigate it or believe that there had ever really been an *Affektenlehre*. And that’s been pretty much the musicological party line since that time.

So what I’m trying to do is to ask questions not about *what* the affects were—how they were characterized in music—but rather *why* it was that, at this particular moment, so many theorists and composers and critics

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seemed to believe that it was *possible* to say something definite about them. And the reason that occurred, I argue, is that there was a basic crisis within aesthetic theory in the eighteenth century, because music really did not fit in to the prevailing understanding of how art worked. There was a neo-Aristotelian idea of how art should function, which was that art should imitate the beautiful in nature, that it should present us with definite imitations or representations of the real world, and musical tones—outside of any kind of text or libretto or story or liturgical context—they really do a very bad job of doing that. I mean, maybe apart from a thunderclap or a bird call, musical tones do a very bad job at imitating the natural world. And so certain critics within the eighteenth century, bumping up against the frustration that they couldn’t manage to fit music inside their systems of the arts, decided that music might, in fact, have some ability,

as material sound vibration, to work directly on the body. That is, music was affective, but it wasn’t affective because it fit inside the traditional structure of imitation, rather because it sailed directly to the nerves of the listener and communicated with the interior of the human body, in a way that none of the other arts could. And so this, I think, is actually the closest to a pendant for our contemporary theory of affect. It’s a second stage in the *Affektenlehre*—a very understudied stage, which I call the “attunement *Affektenlehre*”—and it’s one that most closely corresponds to our contemporary discourses of affect. And so in the book, I try to examine that overlooked stage of the *Affektenlehre*, and to ask questions about what we can learn with it by putting it in dialogue with contemporary affect theory.

**BF:** In your article, I sense a subtle but audible plea to music to not just ride the wave of theory, but rather to sort of reverse the current in some way. Is that something you’re trying to do?

**RMG:** Yes, but let me preface this by saying that, since the New Musicology of the 1990s and 2000s, I think we as a field have actually done a really amazing job at not only making ourselves legible to the rest of the humanities, but also being in dialogue with them and borrowing ideas from the rest of the humanities. But what hasn’t happened as much is that we haven’t opened up our arcane corners, as it were, to areas of study that might find them incredibly useful, you know? There are absolutely incredible questions to be asked about performance,

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and authenticity, and any number of different areas of theoretical inquiry, which we actually, because of our expertise in music, have a great ability to contribute to. And so that is one of the things that I hope the book is modeling, which is, yes, there are actually a lot of ways in which we can insert ourselves into the conversation not by borrowing but also by giving.

**BF:** Do you see a place where this sort of historical genealogy can offer something to ethnomusicology in theory or method?

**RMG:** I really hope so, yes. And I’m really indebted here to Gary Tomlinson (1999, 2001, 2007), especially, who was a mentor of mine, and who pointed out how, in the eighteenth century, intellectual history was really shaped by a culture of encounter and exchange. And that the understanding of the human subject—especially as it’s articulated in works by Denis Diderot, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Giambattista Vico in particular—was very much a product of understanding the modern, inward-reflecting Self as something in contradistinction to and developed in articulation with a kind of understanding of difference from this imagined, exterior Other, that inhabits the rest of the globe. And that was, you know, the result of a process of discovery and encounter. And so, if the story that I’m telling you about affect is ultimately a story about the constitution of a kind of inward-reflecting, contemporary, modern subject, it’s one that relies on this history of encounter. And so what I would love to be in dialogue with ethnomusicology about is that affect, as we currently understand it, has a historicity to it that is grounded in this logic of encounter and alterity in the eighteenth century. And the detailed understanding of affect, historically, actually entails something of the history of ethnomusicology and anthropology as disciplines, in fact. So I want to encourage us to think with these concepts, theoretically and historically at the same time.

**BF:** What sort of response have you gotten from scholars who are, for lack of a better term, dyed-in-the-wool affect theorists?

**RG:** I have actually gotten a lot of responses, and this was crucial to the development of the project. I gave a keynote for a conference at Berkeley, which became the *Representations* article, and a faculty member in literature asked me a series of questions. And I answered everything very genealogically, very historically, trying to appear as though I was coming at this from a purely historicist kind of perspective. And so she finally gets to the end of her questions and asks me, “Okay, well then, so what are you offering?” And I really took her comment and her question very seriously, like, What am I offering? And I realized that what I wanted to do was actually not to borrow from the vitalist, materialist theories that look like our contemporary theories of affect, but to borrow from the earlier, taxonomic theories, and to ask questions about that earlier set of documents, and what this rather different theoretical apparatus might do in the contemporary world. And the answer to that ended up being something like this. Affect theory today is inherently objectless: What would happen if we took the objects of affect theory

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seriously? That is, the objects that engender affects in subjects? What if the story of affect theory isn't just limited to subjective interiors, and subjective responses, and corporeal responses to the outside world? What if we grant to objects a little bit of agency? And here I kind of am riffing off of object-oriented ontology, and object-oriented feminism, and a little bit off David Halperin's work on the objects of sexual desire (2016), and trying to ask questions like, Okay, if objects have agency, then what is their place? What is their node in a system of affective linkages, and can we take them seriously? Can we say anything about them objectively? Can we say anything about them aesthetically? And so my suggestion is, yes, we can, and that, in order to do so, we're going to have to learn from an earlier moment in affect theory.

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