

PROJECT Trio flutist Greg Pattillo on walking, running, practicing beatbox, living in NYC, and returning to Northeast Ohio

by Jarrett Hoffman



“I was trying to play Telemann in the subways, I really was,” said PROJECT Trio flutist Greg Pattillo. “And no one really cared. But you play a funny video game tune with the beatbox, and people *did* stop, and they *did* care to listen.”

On Thursday, February 5 at 8:00 pm, Brooklyn-based chamber music ensemble PROJECT Trio will present a concert in Oberlin Conservatory’s Stull Recital Hall, their program to be announced from the stage. Admission is free.

PROJECT Trio includes flutist Greg Pattillo, cellist Eric Stephenson, and double bassist Peter Seymour. Having met while studying at the Cleveland Institute of Music, the group formed in 2005. They exploded in popularity a year later when Pattillo’s beatbox flute YouTube videos went viral: his [cover](#) of the Super Mario theme and his [remix](#) to the Inspector Gadget theme have garnered 24 million and 28 million views each.

Pattillo spoke to us by phone having just finished a run in Brooklyn. “The way that I beatbox on my flute is very physical. It takes a lot of life energy to do my work. Like, I lose weight doing it. So for me, running is a part of my practicing. I try to run four or five miles a day. And I can find certain breath patterns when I run. I’ve found that can be very centering.”

While Pattillo said he can’t beatbox while running, he raved about the combination of beatboxing and walking — something he does a lot of, living in Brooklyn. “A nice thing

about beatboxing is that you can really do it everywhere you go if you have an open mind and don't care too much about strange looks," he said. "You know, many composers were famous walkers. When we walk, we find our own rhythm. For me, suddenly I can find beatbox rhythms that don't exist in a static practice room. I'm walking to the subway and *boom*, they become extremely fresh and organic. I could write it down — it's exactly what I was doing in the practice room, but it doesn't have the same feeling."

Living in Brooklyn has had other influences on the group. "One of the things that living in the New York City area has done is put a fire under us to bring our A-game," said Pattillo. "Living here makes you want to work hard all of the time. What's great about Brooklyn in particular is that there are people from everywhere and styles of everything all around you. It's extremely diverse, which fits into our narrative of music, with our classical backgrounds and our modern pop interests. You hear enough salsa music in the bodegas and suddenly it's like, we should make a salsa tune. And we have. We took a Brazilian choro tune, 'Andre's New Shoes,' and totally PROJECT Trio-ized it — we covered it and put our crazy cool spin on it. That's totally how we roll. So that diversity has really changed our music and enabled us to cast a wide net."

"We've also been inspired by the parks here. We love to play outside, and I still love to play in subways. You meet a fascinating slice of humanity, and it's a fine way to make some lunch money."

Pattillo famously started out beatboxing in the subways in New York. But how did he get to that point — to even try it? "Beatboxing was something that I turned to when my classical career bit the dust," he said. "There was a moment in my 20s where I didn't get into the sweet orchestra that I'd wanted to. I wasn't sure what to do with my music and myself, so I just bought a ticket and moved to San Francisco. I sold all my stuff, except for my flute, and started over."

"I met some street performers there who were really into beatbox and slam poetry. I would pay attention — I mean, I'm a little musical sponge — and I realized that beatboxing wasn't *too* far off some of the things I was already doing on the flute. I had been really inspired by bluegrass during my time in Ohio, and there's a lot of what they call the *backbeat chop*, where you're making these percussive sounds. I just wasn't doing it in a hip-hop way. So I was like, 'I've got nothing else to do with myself, and I've got lots of time here in San Francisco. I'm gonna figure out how to put this together on the flute.'"

Pattillo would practice beatboxing at the 16th and Mission Thursday Night gathering in San Francisco. "That's what I lived for those days," he said. "I would show up every Thursday and try my new beatbox moves on people. And it started to get better. I moved

to New York, and that was suddenly one of the hats I could put on. And that's a New York sound, traditionally — like hip-hop and MCing.

“I was trying to play Telemann in the subways, I really was. And no one really cared. But you play a funny video game tune with the beatbox, and people *did* stop, and they *did* care to listen. So I was able to spin that into my sound, something that I've practiced, something I've written pieces for, and something I've taught people how to do and how to emulate.”

Beatboxing is but one of the sounds Pattillo uses in PROJECT Trio. “The best part about the PROJECT Trio is that everything's on the table,” said Pattillo. “Not only can I sound funky and hip, but there are also moments when I can sound truly beautiful with all that great classical education I had,” he said, laughing.

Is practicing beatbox similar to practicing classical flute? “Absolutely,” said Pattillo. “There are a wealth of different sounds that each need to be played. It's a bit akin to exercise because it's not necessarily hard to make one beatbox sound once you can do it. But if you're going to do it for five minutes in a row, it quickly becomes a stamina problem. So I do extremely simple things over and over and over to build the foundation of endurance. We do this on our instruments, too, with scales and long-tones, always with tuners and a metronome. The tuner doesn't work so well with beatboxing — it's more like a drum sound than a pitch — but my metronome is *worn out* between 60 and 120 bpm.”

He elaborated on his practicing. “I've developed some basic beatbox idioms, like the 20 basic things that I do. I go through a bunch of bpm's and cycle the idioms through these different ‘kicks’ I make in my mouth.” He demonstrated a couple of kicks for me — one slow groove, one busier one full of subdivisions. “They're like different instruments that I slot into the same track,” he said.

Pattillo has also had to learn to balance practicing beatboxing and flute. “I don't want the beatboxing to change my flute playing to the extent that I can't play all the styles that I want. You can go down the beatbox path so much that you're hardly playing flute anymore. And that's not going to do you well if you're trying to play with an orchestra. And I get to. I'm playing Beethoven 3 next week, I'm stoked. How neat is that? And we do a lot of classical stuff with the Trio, as well. So I practice flute, I practice beatbox, I practice beatbox *and* flute. And I also practice what I call ‘rhythm flute,’ when it's not a beat with the flute, but just really percussive noises with flute playing. So I practice all that.”

A do-it-yourself approach has been essential to Pattillo and PROJECT Trio. “Getting out of college and becoming a professional, one of the things you learn is how to teach

yourself. You take everything you like from everyone else, and you internalize it and make it yours. You know, I love asking people what their warm-up is, and I take 5% of it and include it in my warm-up every day.

“Because at school there wasn’t a high value put on improvisation or writing music, all three of us have learned to teach ourselves and just get into our styles. In the classical tradition these days, the performer plays what the composer writes. Over time we’ve learned to value how our improvisations can turn into songs. So I *also* practice writing music. That’s a part of it, too.”

Indeed, PROJECT Trio does write all of their own music. “We were shocked to find that no one had written music for the flute, cello, and double bass,” said Pattillo. “So actually that’s been kind of nice. If we were a string quartet, our first impulse might not have been to write amazing music, since there’s a lot of amazing music already written for string quartet that’s super challenging and amazing to program. But we didn’t have anything written for us, so we decided to write our own. And it’s been a lot of fun.”

However, the group has also begun to collaborate with an outside composer, as Pattillo told me — “a very nice composer and a pretty good friend of ours: Adam Schoenberg. He’s writing a concerto. It’s been commissioned. It’s paid for. It’s been booked. It’s all happening next year, and we are thrilled. One of the challenges we have in writing our music is writing long music. We all have pop sensibilities, so after 3 or 5 minutes, we’re like, ‘Well, that pretty much says it all.’ But for a composer, writing a 20-minute piece is no problem. It’s what they do. We’re so, so thrilled to be able to do this. We love playing in front of orchestras.”

Pattillo told me more about the project. “We’ve been working on this for the past five years back and forth with him, and we’re so excited. We love his music. We’ve heard his music a lot. We’ve even programmed his music on orchestra shows where we will be playing — as the opening tune, and then we’ll come out and do our own music.

“It’s going to be a blast. It’s exactly what classical music is *supposed* to be today: we are artists with crazy sounds, we’re going to be working with amazing orchestras and conductors, and we have this composer writing a piece for us that’s going to be *his* sound using *our* sound. We’re so excited.”

Though they are alums of CIM, the Trio’s Oberlin recital will be a type of homecoming. “I’m looking forward to going to Oberlin,” said Pattillo. “I used to go to there to hang quite a bit as an undergrad. This will be our first time there as artists, and I am thrilled.”

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