Alright, quick note before the episode starts: this is the second part of a three part series on how music grows out of other music, so you don’t have to listen to the first one to understand this one, but it contextualizes everything pretty well, and I would prefer if you did, so if you have time, listen to the first episode. Thanks. Now, onto the episode.

[CARRIERS - DISPARITION]

So in the last episode, I emphasized, maybe overemphasized, the point that originality doesn’t exist, that every musician is bound to be influenced by everything they’ve heard before, to some extent. I used the example of Radiohead, and how their fourth studio album Kid A was primarily inspired by the electronic producer Aphex Twin. Now, I’ll admit that if you’ve never heard any Radiohead or Aphex Twin tracks, it’s hard to pin down the exact impact one had on the other. Radiohead never stole anything specific from Aphex Twin; they just adopted his style and combined it with their own original compositions. So what about when an artist just copies and pastes directly from one piece to their own? So okay, that’s really common in modern music. Just look at the work of any hip hop artist and you’re bound to find samples, like, I don’t know, Kanye West sampling Daft Punk, back in 2009:

[HARDER BETTER FASTER STRONGER – DAFT PUNK]
BUT I WANNA GO BACK FURTHER THAN THAT, SO LET'S REWIND A BIT…

… ALL THE WAY… TO 1920.


… AND STRAVINSKY’S PULCINELLA.
SO STRAVINSKY WROTE THE EQUIVALENT OF A MODERN MUSIC SAMPLE NEARLY A CENTURY AGO. AND HE’S NOT THE ONLY ONE. “QUOTING,” AS IT’S CALLED IN THE COMPOSING WORLD, IS REALLY COMMON IN CLASSICAL MUSIC. ALL THOSE BIG NAMES—MOZART, HANDEL, BACH—WELL, NOT THE REALLY FAMOUS JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH BUT HIS KINDA FAMOUS SON JOHANN CHRISTIAN BACH. I Couldn’T FIND ANYTHING ON BEETHOVEN, BUT I WOULDN’T BE SURPRISED IF HE SNUCK IN SOMETHING AS WELL. AND SPEAKING OF BEETHOVEN, TODAY ON OUR PROGRAM WE’RE GOING TO BE FEATURING A MORE MODERN COMPOSER THAT HAS QUOTED BEETHOVEN, ALONG WITH MANY OTHERS, IN HIS OWN WORKS. I HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO TALK WITH HIM ABOUT HIS MUSIC AND WHY HE LOOKS TO THE OLD MASTERS FOR INSPIRATION. I’M PATRICK SIMPSON, AND THIS IS MELOMANIA.

[ROLL OVER BEETHOVEN - SCHELLE]

THIS IS ROLL OVER BEETHOVEN, A 2 AND A HALF MINUTE PIECE FOR SOLO PIANO THAT PREMIERED HERE IN INDIANAPOLIS JUST A COUPLE MONTHS AGO. IT WAS WRITTEN BY MICHAEL SCHELLE, A PROFESSOR AND COMPOSER-IN-RESIDENCE AT BUTLER UNIVERSITY. OH, AND IF YOU WERE WONDERING, THE PIECE HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH THAT OLD CHUCK BERRY ROCK N’ ROLL SONG…

[“Nothing from Roll Over Beethoven, I just stole his title. *laughs*”]

SO, SCHELLE HAS BEEN COMPOSING FOR WELL OVER 30 YEARS NOW, AND OVER THAT TIME, HE’S DEVELOPED AN EXTREMELY VARIED BODY OF
WORK, INCLUDING, FOR EXAMPLE, AN OPERA ABOUT THE LAST DAYS OF THE INFAMOUS AMERICAN GANGSTER AL CAPONE…

[THE END OF AL CAPONE]

A SEVEN-PART CHAMBER PIECE CALLED HEARTLAND, WHICH INCLUDED AN AUDIENCE SING-A-LONG DURING THE “THRENOYD FOR THE VICTIMS OF INDIANA…”

[HEARTLAND - THRENOYD FOR THE VICTIMS OF INDIANA]

AND A PIECE THAT… WELL, I’M JUST GOING TO LET THE TITLE SPEAK FOR ITSELF, IT’S CALLED “THE EXORCISM OF THE SUGAR PLUM FAIRY.”

[THE EXORCISM OF THE SUGAR PLUM FAIRY]

SO, IN GENERAL, I’D DESCRIBE SCHELLE AS AN AVANT-GARDE CONTEMPORARY COMPOSER WHO OFTEN TAKES A PLAYFUL AND HUMOROUS APPROACH TO MUSIC. HE’S A COMPOSER WHO TOTALLY INVALIDATES THE STEREOTYPE THAT CLASSICAL MUSIC IS BORING OR SNOBBISH.

OKAY, SO NOW THAT YOU HAVE A GOOD IDEA OF WHAT MICHAEL SCHELLE IS ABOUT, LET’S GO BACK TO ROLL OVER BEETHOVEN, AND WHY SCHELLE DECIDED TO WRITE THIS PIECE IN THE FIRST PLACE.

[“Earlier this year, Miho, my wife, who’s a pianist composer, had been working on Beethoven’s Appassionata Sonata…

[APPASSIONATA - BEETHOVEN]

… and I knew the piece through my life, but having it happening in the living room, right down the hall, it really impressed me, it really struck me how in that particular piece and in a lot of Beethoven pieces, he has a knack of taking us to the absolute limit of passion
and extremes, and just when you think you’re got there, “ah I can’t take anymore,” he ramps it up another notch and keeps going, and the last movement of the Appassionata, that’s a perfect example of this approach to composing.”

AND SCHELLE DIRECTLY QUOTED THAT MOVEMENT FROM THE APPASSIONATA HE’S TALKING ABOUT HERE A FEW TIMES IN ROLL OVER BEETHOVEN...

AND SCHELLE DIRECTLY QUOTED THAT MOVEMENT FROM THE APPASSIONATA HE’S TALKING ABOUT HERE A FEW TIMES IN ROLL OVER BEETHOVEN...

[APPASSIONATA]

[ROLL OVER BEETHOVEN]

[“So that’s what I tried to capture, not at all imitating Beethoven, or even coming close to the clout that he has, but I wanted in a short piano piece to have that same kind of impact. It was complete respect of Beethoven, and saying “he is the master at doing this. I’m going to try my own little teeny-tiny version of doing the same thing, with the utmost respect to the master.”]

[ROLL OVER BEETHOVEN]

BACK IN 2014, SCHELLE COMPOSED A SET OF NINE PRELUDES FOR SOLO PIANO CALLED “STRAIGHT NO LITHIUM,” WHICH ALSO BORROWED FROM A NUMBER OF OTHER COMPOSERS FROM THE CLASSICAL CANON. TAKE, FOR EXAMPLE, THE LAST THREE PRELUDES IN THE PIECE, GROUPED TOGETHER IN A SET CALLED BACCHANALIA.

[STRAIGHT, NO LITHIUM - STRAPPING]

[“Bacchanalia can be taken as the drunken party orgy from the Roman era, or if we take out one of the Cs in the word of Bacchanalia, suddenly you have the name Bach. I used that. And again, this is completely homage to Bach.”]
AND AGAIN, JUST LIKE IN ROLL OVER BEETHOVEN, SCHELLE QUOTES DIRECTLY FROM BACH IN THESE PRELUDES. IN FACT, THE FIRST 10 MEASURES OR SO OF THE LAST PRELUDE, NO LITHIUM, ARE TAKEN DIRECTLY FROM BACH’S PRELUDE IN C SHARP MAJOR...

[PRELUDE IN C SHARP MAJOR – JS BACH]

[NO LITHIUM]

[“This one draws its inspiration from a Bach fugue that again, my wife Miho had been working on at the time, so about 5, 6 years ago, and I just loved that fast 6/8 feeling, and I thought “I’m going to do one of those too,” cause I had a big piano commission. And so it starts, with I think an 8 or 10 measure fragment chunk from the Bach fugue in C sharp minor that she does, and again, it quickly goes off kilter, and then goes for four minutes in that mood and that mode, but with 21st century harmonic and rhythm sensibilities.”]

[NO LITHIUM]

SO, OBVIOUSLY SCHELLE HAS A LOT OF RESPECT FOR THE COMPOSERS HE BORROWS FROM, AND THE QUOTES HE USES ARE VERY EXPlicit. HE’S NOT RIPPING THEM OFF, HE’S TAKING THEIR WORK AS A STARTING POINT, AND THEN BUILDING OFF OF THAT WITH HIS OWN IDEAS, RESULTING IN SOMETHING GREATER THAN WHAT HE COULD HAVE COME UP WITH ON HIS OWN. BUT STILL, THERE ARE SOME RISKS TO BORROWING FROM COMPOSERS TOO OFTEN.

[“It’s a slippery slope, Patrick, and actually back in the 80s, when I was a much younger composer, I did a number of quoting moments in my pieces. I stopped quoting in the...
90s when I wrote a piano concerto, and there was no quoting in it, but the middle movement is a waltz. And I think it’s a very lovely waltz, very simple, as a counter to the very aggressive movements that are on either side of it, very dissonant, very wild, and I wanted this kind of point of relaxation. So many people who know my music said “I love that waltz, where did you get it?” and I’m like “oh man, it’s mine!” “But I know you quote things from time to time…” “no no no, this one’s all mine.” And I thought “woah, I’m just going to do all me.” So really, Lithium is the first time in a good 10, 15 years that I even made a reference to any other composer.”

BUT EVEN IF YOU DON’T QUOTE, YOU’RE STILL GOING TO END UP BEING INFLUENCED BY OTHER MUSIC. LIKE I SAID IN THE FIRST EPISODE OF THIS SERIES, YOU CAN’T WRITE MUSIC IN A VACUUM; EVERYTHING YOU’VE HEARD BEFORE IS GOING TO FEED INTO WHATEVER YOU CREATE YOURSELF.

[“My earliest pieces were copycats of music I love. I have a string quartet that’s a really terrible Bartok string quartet. I have an orchestral piece that’s a really terrible Copland piece, cause I worked with Copland during that time, and I loved Appalachian Spring and all those things. It’s impossible to escape it. If you’re deaf and blind and you live in a little room with no access to anything, and you write music, maybe you can escape it, if you’ve never heard any music in your life. But the minute you hear one string quartet by Bartok, it’s gonna influence you and inspire you one way or another. You may hate it! But that may be the inspiration. “I never want to write anything like that.” Okay? But it’s still an inspiration.”]
SO MUSICIANS SHOULDN’T BE WORRIED ABOUT TRYING TO BE QUOTE-UNQUOTE ORIGINAL, BECAUSE LIKE WE’VE DEMONSTRATED AGAIN AND AGAIN, THAT’S IMPOSSIBLE.

[OVERTURE FROM PULCINELLA]

AND IF YOU LOOK AT SOMEONE LIKE STRAVINSKY, WHO WE DISCUSSED EARLIER, SURE, HE STOLE FROM A BUNCH OF COMPOSERS IN HIS WORK, BUT IN TAKING THOSE QUOTES AND MAKING THEM HIS OWN, HE TRANSFORMED MUSIC AS WE KNOW IT TODAY, INFLUENCING EVERYONE FROM CHARLIE PARKER TO JOHN WILLIAMS.

[“I think it’s all very healthy, this huge continuum that just keeps growing. There are a couple quotes I can throw out there… But the one that’s my favorite, is from an old French movie, and I won’t go into why this happens in the movie, but the crusty old composer at the conservatory is having a premiere, and at the big premiere of his ballet all of his composition students are lined up in the audience, and as the piece starts, one by one, the students say “that’s from my piece that I’m working on now,” and then another one would say “that’s from my symphony that I just finished!” And they all run back at the end of the performance to the conductor, I saw this when I was a pretty young composer, and they say “maestro, maestro! Our teacher, he stole all of our music!” and the maestro said something I’ve never forgotten: “it is much more important to be stolen from, than to steal.”]

[ROLL OVER BEETHOVEN - CHUCK BERRY]

MELOMANIA IS WRITTEN AND PRODUCED BY ME, PATRICK SIMPSON.

THE TRACKS THAT I USED THAT I HAVEN’T ALREADY SAID BY NAME ARE, IN
ORDER OF APPEARANCE, CARRIERS BY DISPARITION, WHICH CAME OFF THEIR NEW ALBUM THAT YOU CAN FIND ON DISPARITION DOT BANDCAMP DOT COM, DAFT PUNK’S HARDER BETTER FASTER STRONGER AND KANYE’S STRONGER, VANILLA ICE’S ICE ICE BABY, SCHELLE’S THE END OF AL CAPONE AND STRAPPING, AND OF COURSE THIS IS CHUCK BERRY’S ROLL OVER BEETHOVEN. THIS IS THE FIRST PART OF A THREE PART SERIES ABOUT HOW MUSIC GROWS FROM OTHER MUSIC, AND THE NEXT TWO EPISODES WILL BE COMING OUT SOMETIME OVER THE NEXT MONTH. MELOMANIA IS A PRODUCTION OF 91.3 WHJE, BROADCASTING FROM BEAUTIFUL, DOWNTOWN, CARMEL INDIANA. THANKS FOR LISTENING.

[ROLL OVER BEETHOVEN]