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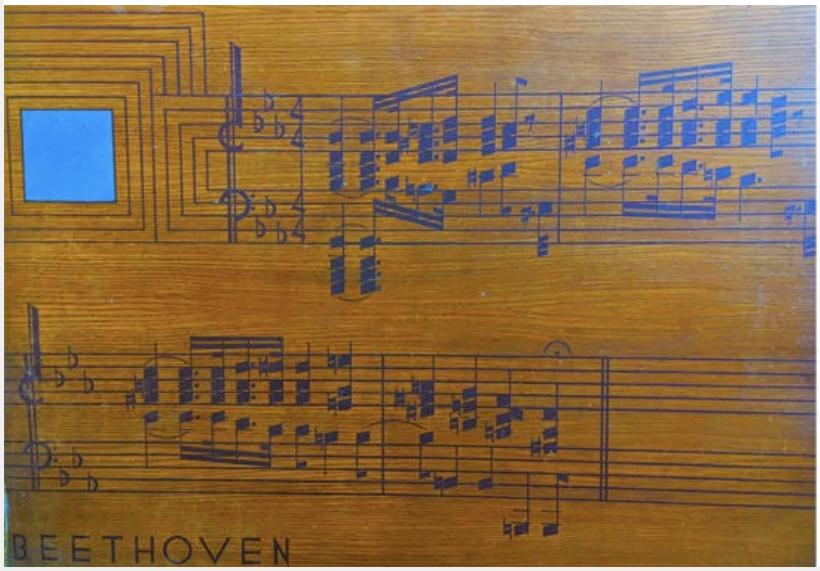
ISSUE FEB 28TH 2024 *February 28th 2024*

SPECIAL FEATURE



Beethoven in the Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright

Article by Frank Baron

There is hardly any debate about which of Frank Lloyd Wright's parents influenced him most in his career as an architect. When Wright was only a child, the mother had already decided that he should become an architect. A bitter conflict between the parents resulted in a divorce, and the father disappeared from the eighteen-year-old son's life. The mother's expectations about the boy's future appeared secure. Father and son never met again. The father, not being able to earn a reliable income, was in no position to challenge this expectation. Although he had backgrounds in various promising fields, including medicine, law, ministry, and, above all, music, his restlessness did not allow him to

remain in a single profession or position long enough to attain financial security. As his son's piano instructor he had been harsh, perhaps too demanding. The son's "knuckles were rapped by the lead pencil in the impatient hand that would sometimes force the boy's hand into position."[1] Frank Lloyd Wright abandoned efforts to play the piano after the divorce. His mother understood how to guide him toward an ideal career. There is an understandable tendency of biographers to neglect the father's influence. But is this neglect justified? Has the mother's hostility to her husband successfully erased traces of the father as a factor in Frank Lloyd Wright's highly successful career?

The nightly piano playing of the father, to which Frank Lloyd Wright as "a small boy" was listening—while the parents thought that he was sleeping—created a lasting impression. At such times the father often played Beethoven. Above all, one piece of the master's works remained indelible throughout the son's adulthood: the strains of the master's *Pathetique Sonata*.

The adult Frank Lloyd Wright evidently did not attain the expected proficiency in playing piano. He probably did not learn to read and play from musical notes. His sister recalled that he never "mastered the business of reading music easily, but learned things by heart and never forgot them."[2] On the basis of those highly memorable nightly listening sessions Wright could evidently remember and play certain Beethoven passages. Thus, having been exposed to the frequent repetitions of these pieces, he developed a habit of improvising on them.

Wright was proud to declare in his autobiography that he owned eleven pianos in his residences in Wisconsin and Arizona. This eccentric obsession for pianos was most dramatically demonstrated in a report about a valuable Steinway piano he was able to borrow and test on the occasion of a 1953 exhibition of his architectural achievements. The

exhibition had traveled through Europe and was finally in New York. The photographer Pedro E. Guerrero recalled:

With Mr. Wright's required piano installed, the 1953 exhibition was ready to open in New York. There was no apparent reason for the piano; no performances were scheduled. Only when the exhibition was not crowded, did Mr. Wright sit and run through his obligatory bars of Beethoven or Bach. Toward the end of the show Mr. Wright sent for a truck from Taliesin to take the piano back there. But the lender, Steinway and Sons, got wind of Mr. Wright's intentions and rescued the piano.[3]

If Wright had intended to abscond with the Steinway piano permanently, he had undoubtedly convinced himself that this particular piano was very special. As he played during the exhibition, he realized that he needed not any piano; he needed the best.

In her fictional biography *Loving Frank*, author Nancy Horan provided an explanation for the piano obsession—when confronted with the question why he had just purchased three pianos, Wright is said to have insisted that he had to have the pianos. Why? He said: "I need a good piano. It helps me work."[4]

There is evidence that piano playing supported Wright at crucial stages in his work, even before he finalized details at the drawing board. An unfortunate fire helps to explain how this crucial, creative work took place. This fire in the spring of 1952 destroyed the theater of Hillside (Taliesin) in Wisconsin. Frances Nemtin, one of Wright's apprentices, reported what she had personally observed. A fire had been set intentionally to raked leaves, but then, because of a sudden gust of wind, the fire got out of hand. It spread quickly and consumed the theater, also gutting the adjoining corridor, but finally stopping at the living room.

When the living room was safe, Mr. Wright insisted on going there to survey the damage. Shortly I heard him playing the piano there, in

consolation? He had lost a valued concert-grand Bechstein in the theater, as well as the historic first curtain, sculpture, gongs, and an incomparable space.

"I can see it now," he said then of the future theater he was already designing.[5] Apprentice Kelly Oliver, who arrived from Taliesin West in Arizona shortly after the fire, remembers having heard a rumor that was circulating among the apprentices that Mr. Wright had already been planning the new theater while the fire was still in progress.[6]

Frances Nemtin's suspicion that the piano playing, which she later estimated to have continued for an entire hour, was intended as "consolation" -- in response to the unfortunate destruction. That suggestion, however, probably cannot serve as the best explanation for Wright's actions. It is possible that the playing gave Wright the best opportunity to reflect and to "work" on how he would create an entirely new theater, what he thought might be necessary to accomplish that. Seated at the piano, improvising, he was able to imagine how a new theater could arise from the ashes.

Paul Hendrickson interviewed Frances Nemtin decades later and was intent on finding out what particular piece Wright was playing during that lengthy piano playing session. On the basis of other interviews he had come to the conclusion that Wright had been playing Beethoven's *Pathetique Sonata*. Ms. Nemtin could not be certain after the many years (at least 60 years after the fire!).[7] It is reasonable to think that she would not be able to recall such specific information. Even if she had, it is likely that she might have heard Wright's playing improvisations on the basis of that particular sonata. Such improvisations could have served as an essential support for designing the new theater.

The theater acquired a plaque displaying notes from the same Beethoven sonata. In other words, it appears, after all, that Wright's "work" at the piano, his improvisations owed much to the Pathetique It was probably a

crucial link in the shaping of the new theater. With such a plaque Wright was evidently recognizing how much he owed not only to Beethoven, but also, indirectly, to his father. It was the sign of gratitude for the constructive, musical background in the creation of an impressive new theater.

Apprentice and musician John Amarantides wrote the following report on the preparation of this plaque:

In the spring of 1952, the Hillside theater/playhouse and dining room were razed by fire. I experienced this magnificent magical space (theater) for only two months in the fall of 1951. During that time I often played Vivaldi on Saturday evenings prior to the movie, always at Mr. W's request. When the rebuilding of the theater was nearing completion, Mr. W. directed me to stop plastering walls/ceilings and "design" the Beethoven Pathetique panel for the position where it is located to this day. There was a similar panel in the old theater. But I don't remember it in detail. The new panel's graphic design is mine, though the blue square was indicated by Mr. W. He said, "John, we'll assign the blue square to Beethoven." The precise music passage was selected by Mr. W. As you know, it's the first recurrence (recapitulation) of the opening bars. He especially admired the Pathetique for its powerful architectural structure. His father often played this sonata when he (FLW) was a young boy.[8]

Wright wrote in his autobiography:

When I was a small child I would often lie awake listening to the strains of the Sonata Pathetique—Father playing it on the Steinway square downstairs in the Baptist minister's study at Weymouth. It takes me back to boyhood again when I hear it now. And the other sonatas were as familiar then as the symphonies and later quartets are now. When I build I often hear this music and, yes, when Beethoven made music, I am sure he

sometimes saw buildings like mine in character, whatever form they may have taken then.[9]

The key common element between Beethoven's composition and Wright's architecture was the process of **building**. Wright emphasized this particular understanding of Beethoven with an emphatic repetition: Beethoven was "building, building, building, building a great edifice of sound."[10] Hence Wright presented the general observer with an extraordinary challenge: to believe that he was able to translate in his mind Beethoven's mysterious "building" process into the physical form of his architectural plans.

To imagine how the piano playing could support the creation of architectural structures may appear to be, at first, a matter of pure speculation. But consider the manner in which Wright employed improvisation on the piano to organize his building plans. Vern Swaback (Wright's apprentice beginning in 1957), explored an aspect this question. Because Swaback had hoped, but failed, to receive support from Wright for his own particular interest in jazz, the conversation took an unexpected turn.

[Swaback said to Wright]: http://"[MilesDavis]doesinmusic what you [Wright] talk about in architecture. You talk about the Japanese print as being something that eliminates the insignificant. . . That's what Miles Davis does in music. Instead of just playing lots of chromatic scales, he creates space and frames with notes. . . Mr. Wright said, "Well, jazz is an art, it's not a high art, but it's an art." And that discouraged me a little bit, because he was an enthusiastic backer of jazz, I think, at one time in his life. I think later in his life he probably relegated it a little bit lower than he had. But what really happened that night was quite wonderful[,] was [that] he started to talk about how he designed. And he said, "I don't design from ideas, I design from feelings." And he walked over to the piano and he said, "I will show you what I mean." And he sat down, and he ad-libbed, as he

did often. And you could hear almost a concerto form. There was a statement of a theme, and a development of it, and a kind of a recapitulation and a summary ending it all. And he got up and said, "Like that."[11]

Responding to the challenge the apprentice posed, Wright stressed the importance of feelings in contrast to ideas. That explanation must be seen in context, however. The music that Wright had in mind entailed a disciplined structure. It had, as Swaback himself observed, the development of a particular theme, leading to a final recapitulation. In other words, there is no evidence of a vagueness of feeling. This particular discussion provides a glimpse into Wright's piano "work." For him that work necessarily entailed the piano as an essential instrument in the creative process: imagining musical forms that he could translate into corresponding physical structures. Having learned from Goethe that architecture was frozen music, Wright was determined to "freeze" his music. [12]

Wright quoted Robert Schumann's observation about Beethoven's Fifth Symphony: "that revolution could take place within the four walls of a symphony and the police be none the wiser." Then Wright elaborated:

Integral ornament is founded in organic simplicities, just as Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, that amazing revolution in tumult and splendor of sound, was built on four tones, based upon a rhythm a child could play on the piano with one finger. Imagination supreme reared the four tones repeated in the simple rhythm into a great symphonic poem that is probably the noblest thought[-]built edifice in the world. [13]

It was perhaps Wright's aim to create such a revolution with his final masterpiece, the Guggenheim Museum. It would have to be an edifice of sound, in the way his father imagined it; he had taught him, after all, to see "a symphony as an edifice of sound!" [14] Wright labored about fifteen years to complete work on that project. To Baroness Hilla von

Rebay, who had first approached him to create an appropriate home for the masterpieces of non-objective modern art, Wright explained on May 12, 1945 his revolutionary proposal. When he articulated his vision, Wright might have had Beethoven's revolutionary aims in mind. He explained the future museum in terms of sound.

The unique building is so symphonic in character that the least discord at any one point echoes throughout the entire structure. Perhaps it is folly to try make a building live so completely as an entity, but the faith otherwise is within me and won't leave it at that. I seem compelled to perfect it and have no power to neglect a single detail if I would. [15]

It is challenging to formulate precisely how Wright sought to translate musical ideas into his buildings. Jack Howe, one of Wright's oldest apprentice and his most trusted draughtsman, came perhaps closest to understanding the mystery of how Wright moved from Beethoven's music to architecture.

Beethoven composed in modular fashion, particularly his later works, building up from small units known as motives, rather than from a longer melodic or lyrical line. Similarly, Wright drafted up his architecture on a grid, using simple, modular forms he repeated and varied throughout the entire edifice, achieving what he called a "symphonic" unity. . . . Beethoven offered a rich vein of inspiration to an architect eager to transcend the old symmetries of classical architecture. [16]

The father's subversive legacy helped Wright discover in Beethoven's music elements missing in traditional architecture. The elusive interplay between two distinct disciplines, music and architecture, provided a powerful creative force. The son was late in recognizing how much he owed to his father, who had died in 1925. Wes Peters, Wright's son-in-law, about a year before his death, recalled Wright's very first visit to his

father's grave at the churchyard of Bear Valley, Wisconsin, near to the spot where his first wife was buried. Peters recalled:

. . . . and we hunted around until we found it. . . . [Mr. Wright] kept reminiscing about how his father had not only taught him to love music, but Mr. Wright became interested in looking at his father's old books, where he had actually written some of the music in the books. And he said he realized his father was really a great influence on him. [17]

The reconstruction of that influence suggests that Wright recognized that, by the circuitous path of his Beethoven improvisations, his architectural achievements owed much to his father.

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[1] *An Autobiography*, Book I, [1932]. In: *Frank Lloyd Wright: Collected Writings*, vol. 1I, pp. 110-111.

[2] Maginel Wright Barney, *The Valley of the God-Almighty Joneses* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1965), p. 133.

[3] Pedro Guerrero, *Picturing Wright* (San Francisco: Pomegranate Art Books, 1994), p. 137.

[4] Nancy Horan, *Loving Frank, a Novel* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2007), p. 288.

[5] Frances Nemtin's statement is preserved at the Frank Lloyd Foundation in Taliesin West. I am grateful to Rebecca Hagen for a copy of this document.

[6] My interview with Oliver of October 2023 in Lawrence, Kansas.

[7] Paul Hendrickson, *Plagued by Fire: The Dreams and Furies of Frank Lloyd Wright* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019), pp. 479-480.

[8] I am grateful to Indira Berndtson for a copy of this document.

[9] *An Autobiography*, Book V, [1943]. In: *Frank Lloyd Wright: Collected Writings*, vol. 1V, pp. 147-148. Wright's father taught him that Beethoven was a builder. "His thinking process was a building process."

[10] Roger Friedland and Harold Zellman, *The Fellowship: The Untold Story of Frank Lloyd Wright & the Taliesin Fellowship* (New York: Harper/Collins, 2007), p. 226.

[11] Vern Swaback statement is preserved at the Frank Lloyd Foundation in Taliesin West. I am grateful to Indira Berndtson for a copy of this document.

[12] Johann Peter Eckermann, *Gespräche mit Goethe* [Conversations with Goethe] (Zurich: Artemis, 1948), p. 329.

[13] *An Autobiography*, Book III, [1932]. In: *Frank Lloyd Wright: Collected Writings*, vol. 1I, pp. 367 and 272.

[14] *An Autobiography*, Book I, [1932]. In: *Frank Lloyd Wright: Collected Writings*, vol. 1I, pp. 110-111.

[15] Frank Lloyd Wright, *The Guggenheim Correspondence*. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), pp. 60-61. Cf. Appendix XI.

[16] Cf. John H. Howe, "Reflections of Taliesin," in: *Northwest Architect*, July –August 1969: 26-30 and 63.

[17] Hendrickson, pp. 397 and 449.

Photo of painted wood panel by Indira Berndtson. Photo of Frank Lloyd Wright playing piano, 1953, by Pedro E. Guerrero. Special thanks to W. Kelly Oliver for connecting us with the author..

https://wrightsociety.com/issues/399

Eric, Bryan & Lisa | Wright Society Publishers

20 Danada Square West, #132 Wheaton, Illinois 60189

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Published with Curated