This section examines how Frank Lloyd Wright’s exposure to the music of Ludwig van Beethoven helped shape the architect’s conception of artful building. The author explains how Beethoven departed from musical conventions of the time and cast a powerful shadow over nineteenth century culture. Wright was exposed to Beethoven’s music at a young age; his autobiography and other accounts offer glimpses of the composer’s influence as well as the architect’s own musical talents.
When studying Frank Lloyd Wright, it becomes immediately clear that he was a man of great musical intelligence. Sadly, his natural talents were never fully cultivated. But while the world may have missed a fine musician, it gained a great architect. Perhaps the matter is not as simple as that, but Wright would have agreed. He wrote the following about a thought that occurred to him while playing the piano:

I suddenly stopped and wheeled around toward [Carl Sandburg] with one of those mischievous impulses that I like to practice upon my friends and that so often ruin me. I said, “Carl, if my mother hadn’t decided for me that I was to be an architect, I should have been a very great musician. It would have been my next choice. And since the mind required for greatness in either art is the same, I should have ranked with Beethoven, I am sure” (Wright, F.L., 1943, p. 421).

Of all history’s composers Wright had a special respect for Ludwig van Beethoven, the legendary German composer. The goal of this paper is to show how Beethoven’s music influenced Wright’s life and work. A brief biography of Beethoven is necessary before reporting on Wright’s experiences with music and determining how the influence of Beethoven is evident in Wright’s work.

Ludwig van Beethoven was born in Bonn of the Holy Roman Empire on December 16, 1770 (Kamien, 2000, p. 278). He came from a family of musicians; therefore, his talent was recognized at an early age. His father, Johann Beethoven, was a tenor in the local court who billed his son as a child prodigy much as Leopold Mozart had done. Beethoven began learning composition around age nine from the court organist Christian Gottlob Neefe. He was already a skilled keyboard player and by age eleven held his own position in the court as assistant to the court organist (Kamien, 2000, p. 278).

In 1787, Beethoven traveled to Vienna at age 16. At that time, Vienna was the seat of Austrian power and home to composers Joseph Haydn and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Beethoven received a few lessons from Mozart (although that is a topic of scholarly dispute) after which the master is said to
have remarked, “Keep your eyes on him; someday he will give the world something to talk about” (Kamien, 2000, p. 278). Beethoven soon learned that his mother was ill and returned to Bonn. She died shortly thereafter. His father turned to alcohol to cope, which eventually cost him his position in the court choir. Ludwig became legal guardian of his younger brothers and took a greater role as musician in the court.

Thanks to support from the Elector of Bonn, Beethoven returned to Vienna in 1792 to study composition with Haydn. During his first years in the city, Beethoven amazed audiences as a popular virtuoso of the pianoforte as well as a talented composer. He wrote his first two symphonies and a number of piano sonatas (including the Pathetique, op.13) in these years.

Beethoven began to experience hearing loss while still in his late twenties. The irony that one of the Europe’s finest musicians would lose his ability to hear was not lost in Beethoven. It tormented him; he even contemplated suicide. He wrote to his brothers in 1802:

[R]eflect now that for 6 years I have been in a hopeless case, aggravated by senseless physicians, cheated year after year in the hope of improvement, finally compelled to face the prospect of a lasting malady... when I at times tried to forget all this, O how harshly was I repulsed by the doubly sad experience of my bad hearing, and yet it was impossible for me to say to men speak louder, shout, for I am deaf. Ah how could I possibly admit an infirmity in the one sense which should have been more perfect in me than in others, a sense which I once possessed in highest perfection, a perfection such as few surely in my profession enjoy or ever have enjoyed...I would have put an end to my life – only art it was that withheld me, ah it seemed impossible to leave the world until I had produced all that I felt called upon to produce (as cited in Thayer & Forbes, 1991, pg. 304).

These tormented words became known as the “Heiligenstadt Testament” after the village outside Vienna where the composer sought refuge. Fortunately, Beethoven did indeed continue writing and the Testament is used to mark the emergence of a new style period in his compositions.

Historians have divided Beethoven’s output into three style periods appropriately labeled early (to 1802), middle (1802-1815), and late (1815-1827) (Bonds, 2010, p. 398). His early compositions take their lead from the forms and styles established during the Classical Period (of Haydn and Mozart). But as Bonds (2010) describes, “We hear in them an original voice that is unquestionably Beethoven” (p. 398). The middle period beginning after Beethoven had seemingly accepted his deafness is also referred to as his heroic period due to its “evocation of struggle and triumph” (p. 398). Bonds comments further: “As if to compensate for the isolation his deafness forced on him, Beethoven’s art engages life to the fullest. Some of his most famous works manifest a sense of struggle to overcome an adversity imposed by fate. The Third, Fifth, and Ninth Symphonies, in particular, follow a
The trajectory that has been compared to a journey from strife to victory, from darkness to light” (p. 396).

The Third through Eighth Symphonies belong to the middle period, but Beethoven wrote the Ninth Symphony during the late period. Bonds (2010) writes that during this period, with a few exceptions, Beethoven “abandoned the heroic style for one that many subsequent critics found to be more enigmatic yet no less moving. Above all, the late works are characterized by an exploration of musical extremes in areas such as form, proportion, texture, and harmony” (p. 398).

Beethoven suffered from chronically poor health for the remainder of his life. Besides hearing loss, he battled ailments of the liver, pancreas, and intestines. He also became embroiled in a custody battle over his nephew Karl after the boy’s father, Beethoven’s brother, died in 1816. Beethoven was eventually successful in securing guardianship but the ordeal lasted several years and consumed a great deal of time and energy which affected his output. Even so, Beethoven managed a creative outburst in his final years. Beethoven became a national hero and was considered the world’s greatest instrumental composer until he passed away on March 26, 1827 (Bonds, 2010, p. 397).

Beethoven holds a unique place in musical history. He is typically considered a member of the triumvirate of Viennese classicists (along with predecessors Haydn and Mozart) but is just as often cited as a transitional figure into the Romantic Period, which was to dominate the middle of the nineteenth century. Although he used forms and styles from the Classical era, he clearly did not shy from altering them when he felt it necessary.

The emergence of Romanticism in music echoed a much broader movement that took place throughout the arts of the nineteenth century. The emotion and humanism at home in Romanticism were a reaction to the measured thought and well-established social structures of the Enlightenment (the period most closely identified with Classical music). Bonds (2010) describes the implications for music:

Romanticism was closely associated with the philosophical outlook known as Idealism, a system of thought based on the premise that objects in the physical world are a reflection of ideas in the mind…Idealism allows for a realm that lies beyond reason and words and thus grants more room to the spiritual and even mystical. And for many 19th-century Idealist philosophers and critics, instrumental music – because it is intrinsically abstract – was the art form that most approximates the disembodied realm of ideas…[Music moved] beyond the realm of the physical to the realm of the spiritual and infinite (p. 373).

These underlying thoughts present during the seminal years of Romanticism foreshadowed an enormous shift in the social status of composers. For example, Haydn spent his early career writing for a wealthy patron. He worked under contract as a skilled servant, wore a uniform, and was to “compose such music as His Highness shall order”. Mozart had some success as a freelance musician but ultimately died
in debt. Beethoven, however, was very successful in an environment nearly identical to Mozart’s thanks to a growing middle class and “his own commanding personality, which prompted the nobility to give him gifts and treat him as an equal” (Kamien, 2000, p. 222). In 1808, Beethoven was offered a position outside of Vienna. To persuade him to stay, a group of the local nobility set up a fund whose interest would provide Beethoven with a regular salary (Bonds, 2010, p. 399).

This shift toward prestige was to endure beyond Beethoven’s own time. Beethoven’s powerful stature combined with increasingly popular Romantic attitudes and the public’s affinity for artists being capable of revealing spiritual realms had a lasting impact. “[Beethoven] dubbed himself a ‘tone poet,’ an artist who creates poetry with notes rather than words. The public, in turn, began to see great composers as divinely inspired high priests of art who could provide glimpses into a loftier, more spiritual world” (Bonds, 2010, p. 372).

Music critics of the Romantic Period such as E.T.A. Hoffman embraced Beethoven’s role of tone poet and encouraged others to connect with his music emotionally. In Hoffman’s view, “Beethoven’s music sets in motion the machinery of awe, of fear, of terror, or pain, and awakens that infinite yearning which is the essence of romanticism” (as cited in Burnham, 2000, p. 274). American transcendentalist Walt Whitman seems to have made such a connection – he alludes to Beethoven in verse comparing the Septet op. 20 to “nature laughing on a hillside in sunshine” (as cited in Dennis, 2000, p. 295).

Beethoven’s music became significant across all creative disciplines and his single-minded attitude regarding the value of artists changed their role in society. Years later, Wright would come to expect the same degree of respect once granted to tone poets. Wright’s eccentric behavior toward clients can be explained as an indirect effect of Beethoven’s life and attitudes.

Beethoven brought new power and intensity to composition as well as a willingness to bend the rules of form and harmony. While the focus here will be the symphonies – his most popular and enduring works – Beethoven’s innovations were not limited to orchestral music. In addition to the nine symphonies, he wrote thirty-two piano sonatas, sixteen string quartets, and five piano concertos, two masses, and an opera (Kamien, 2000, p. 283-284).

The prototypical symphony in Beethoven’s time consisted of four movements. Each movement was a “self-contained composition with its own set of themes.” The movements were, however, related by key and composed so as to complement each other musically. Particular movements also had a predictable structure within themselves; the first and often the fourth movements adhered to sonata allegro form, the second was slow and song-like, and the third was a minuet (Kamien, 2000, p. 237).

For Beethoven, these were starting points. In the Eroica Symphony (no. 3), Beethoven replaced the usual minuet with a scherzo. The symphony was also much longer than any of Haydn’s or Mozart’s due to his willingness to expand the development and coda sections of sonata allegro form. The Fifth Symphony uses a single rhythmic motif throughout (short-short-
short-long, thought to represent Fate knocking at the door). Along with the Eroica, the Fifth presented a new concept of the symphony as a whole, unified composition rather than the sum of its parts.

The Pastoral Symphony (no. 6) presented the three final movements seamlessly without the usual pause. It also contained five movements rather than the usual four, each with a programmatic title such as “Awakening of cheerful feelings upon arrival in the country.” In reference to instrumental works of the time period, art music is classifiable as programmatic or absolute. Program music includes references to a narrative outside of the music itself, absolute music does not. Program music was not new during the Classical Period but was rarely used. The practice became popular among composers of the Romantic Period (Kamien, 2000, p. 305).

The final movement of the Ninth Symphony featured a full chorus and vocal soloists, something unheard of for an instrumental work such as the symphony. This same movement is so long and strange in form that some consider it a symphony within a symphony.

Beethoven’s symphonies changed the orchestra itself by greatly expanding the instrumentation. This allowed the composer to create new timbres by arranging new combinations of instruments. Beethoven frequently wrote for a complement of double winds and brass; he was the first to add parts for the trombone, piccolo and contrabassoon (Kamien, 2000, p. 283). This suggests that in Beethoven’s mind, the orchestra was more than an assemblage of musicians but an instrument in its own right capable of a huge variety of sounds.

This point cannot be understated in its relevance to Frank Lloyd Wright. Beethoven was one of the first composers to harness the full power and potential of the orchestra in order to better express himself. The nine symphonies, in their final forms, retain a personality that is uniquely Beethoven’s. Listening to one means entering a sound environment – an aural space – that was shaped by Beethoven as only Beethoven could. In a sense, Beethoven was a pioneering designer of the orchestra’s soundscape. This idea was not lost on Wright who recognized Beethoven’s rare control over the orchestra.

Frank Lloyd Wright was exposed to the music of Beethoven at a very early age. His father, William Wright, was a talented musician. Secrest (1992) has suggested that his talent may have been a “mitigating factor” in winning approval to marry Anna Lloyd Jones, his second wife and mother of Frank Lloyd Wright (p. 49). William was a father and widower born and raised in New England; Anna was a teacher fourteen years William’s junior from a notoriously clan-minded Welsh family. Despite the assumed reservations from the Lloyd Joneses, the two were married in 1865. William studied medicine and law before becoming a Baptist minister shortly after marrying Anna. He was also a skilled keyboard and violin player, a fine vocalist, and capable teacher. William performed popular dances on the violin but also gave piano and voice recitals which were “the finest anyone had heard” (Secrest, 1992, p. 49).

Wright commented that music was his father’s refuge amidst frequent vocational changes (Wright, F.L., 1943, p. 10). Wright’s earliest years were spent
in a number of different communities as William, then a minister, moved the family between different congregations. This included Richland Center, Wisconsin where the local newspaper published a favorable review after one of William’s recitals and McGregor, Iowa where William bought a stake in the local music store (Secrest, 1992, p. 53). The family moved to Madison in 1877 when William became pastor of a Unitarian congregation. He soon opened a music conservatory above Pinckney Street and started giving lessons. Wright and his childhood friend, Robie, were his father’s pupils (Secrest, 1992, p. 73).

Apparently Wright was less than the model student—he recalled piano lessons with his father during which his “knuckles were rapped by the lead pencil [in] the impatient hand” (Wright, F.L., 1943, p. 12).

Wright surrounded himself with the music of his favorite composers; he was a man of discriminating musical taste. His third wife, Olgivanna Lloyd Wright, wrote that her husband preferred the music of Antonio Vivaldi, J.S. Bach, Mozart, and especially Beethoven. Wright had an affinity for the human voice and the choral works of Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina but disliked opera believing it to be “removed from living experience” (Wright, O.L., 1966, p. 136). He also liked Johannes Brahms, Frederic Chopin, and Richard Wagner, though Wagner’s tendency to leave dissonances unresolved left Wright ultimately “bored” (p. 136).

Wright listened to the music of these composers incessantly throughout his life. As a boy, he had no choice but to listen to his father play piano sonatas while he tried to sleep. “[M]uch of Beethoven and Bach the boy learned by heart as he lay listening” (Wright, F.L., 1943, p. 13). This troubled Wright as a boy but by adulthood he had developed a real passion for music. While in Oak Park Wright would stay up “every night until or two or three in the morning” playing piano sonatas just as his father had once done (as cited in Secrest, 1992, p. 135).

While at Taliesin Wright had loudspeakers installed around the grounds to play works by the great composers. The speakers were in use “five or six hours during the day, until everybody begged [Olgivanna] to have them turned off” (Wright, O.L., 1966, p. 135). Wright appreciated live music and made sure that it was part of life at Taliesin. The Fellowship would sometimes host visiting musicians but they also fielded a string quartet referred to as the “Farmer-Labor Quartet” and a chorus in house (Secrest, 1992, p. 408).

Wright frequently improvised at the piano which he called “letting the piano play itself for its own amazement” (F. L. Wright, 1943, p. 421). Wright occasionally made use of this talent at parties for the entertainment of guests or during respites from long sessions in the studio (Secrest, 1992, p. 135, 251). Olgivanna described how her husband would improvise for her at Taliesin supposedly inspired by their love. Some recordings of these improvisations were made but Olgivanna maintained that they sound reserved since Wright would become self-conscious around the recording machine (Wright, O.L., 1966, p. 137).

There are numerous other anecdotes that illustrate how music was part of Wright’s life. The most illuminating stories, however, come from Wright’s
own autobiography. Nearly all of the stories are related to Wright’s father who introduced his son to the music of Beethoven and others at a very young age.

Wright resented this exposure as a child but grew to appreciate its worth even after his relationship with his father disintegrated. This is particularly true in the story Wright told of his father playing the church organ while his young son desperately tried to keep the organ bellows filled with air:

Streams of sound went pouring out into the Church against the stained-glass windows fortissimo...Then came a long-drawn-out, softer passage. It was easier to pump – the Vox Humana – faraway beauty, tenderness and promise in it stealing over boy-senses. He stopped, tears and all, entranced. Listening – breathless – he forgot, but suddenly remembered just in time to work away again with all his might to keep air enough for the Bach as it broke into the sound-waves of triumphant, march-like progress. The heroic measures brought him back again to strength and for a while he pumped away with fresh energy, hopefully. But as on and on the wondrous music went, more and more the young back and arms ached until again the tears began to flow (1943, p. 12).

Wright’s purpose in telling the story was to illustrate his bitterness toward his father and the strained family dynamic of his youth. But in doing so, he acknowledged a moment of commune with the music of Bach and its seemingly spiritual quality. He described being “entranced” by Bach. In Wright’s adult mind, this childhood event foreshadowed the kinship he would feel with music’s greatest composers.

Wright recalled the times when his father would compose. “[H]e always held the pen crosswise in his mouth while he would go to and from the desk to the keyboard trying over the passage he had written. His face would soon become fearful with black smudges. To his observant understudy at those times he was weird” (1943, p. 13). Wright may have disdained his father’s behavior but these sessions gave him insight into the creative mind behind the music. “Was music made in such heat and haste as this, the boy wondered? How did Beethoven make his? And how did Bach make his?” He goes so far as to imagine Beethoven composing “when it was raining, or just going to” and Bach “when the sun shone bright and breezes were blowing” (1943, p. 13).

Wright always associated the music he heard to its composer. After her husband’s death, Olgivanna Lloyd Wright recalled a typical discussion following a guest’s performance at Taliesin. Olgivanna had to “remind [Wright] that the performer needed praise also. But he would insist, ‘It is the composer who is the creator of the music.’” She pointed out that musicians are necessary interpreters without whom there would be no music. He is said to have responded, “That is secondary. It is the composer we should consider first” (Wright, O.L., 1966, p. 135). Wright clearly admired the creative mind. He seems to have looked beyond the surface of the music – its performance – to connect with the long-dead mind that conceived it so as to form a bond.
In his autobiography, Wright wrote that his father taught him to recognize a symphony as an edifice of sound (1943, p. 13). Whether or not Wright actually remembers such a lesson from William is impossible to confirm, but the fact that he included the anecdote in his autobiography proves his conception of the composer as the shaper of aural space in the same way he believed the architect to be the shaper of physical space. Wright believed that the disciplines were linked at their core; he saw architecture as the “harmony of planes, depths and heights, and the spirit of life” (Wright, O.L., 1966, p. 135) just as a musical composition could be understood as a harmony of pitches, timbres, and human expression. In Wright’s mind, the creation of artful architecture was analogous to fine musical composition. That, of course, would make the world’s greatest architect – himself – a composer on the same order of the musical giants. It is no wonder, then, that Wright felt a certain kinship to Beethoven whom he believed to be the world’s greatest ever musician.

Wright felt such a strong camaraderie with Beethoven that he went beyond acknowledging his own feelings and suggested that Beethoven felt the same connection. Wright explained: “When I build I often hear his 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. I am sure there is a kinship there” (1943, p. 422).

But Beethoven was more than just a peer to Wright. The following passage confirms that Wright recognized Beethoven as a role model and teacher – a very exclusive club, indeed! He wrote:

In Beethoven’s music I sense the master mind, fully conscious of the qualities of heartful soaring imagination that are god-like in a man. The striving for entity, oneness in diversity, depth in design, repose in the final expression of the whole—all these are there in common pattern between architect and musician. So I am going to a delightful, inspiring school when I listen to Beethoven’s music (Wright, F.L., 1943, p. 422).

Despite his profound respect, Wright stopped short of placing Beethoven’s creative genius above his own. In the following passage, Wright appeared to be almost envious of Beethoven before soon recovering his ego. He began:

[M]y medium is even more abstract—so kindred spirits who understand the building are even more rare than in music…The musician’s facility is so much greater than the architect’s can ever be. The idiosyncrasy of the client does not exist for the great composer. The rules and regulations imposed by the laws of physics upon the performances of the architect are not present to any great extent in the scheme of things submitted to the musician (Wright, F.L., 1943, p. 422).

Wright concluded by suggesting that “the more severely limited art when success does crown creative effort is the greater and more abiding achievement” (p. 423) as if to proclaim his place atop history’s pantheon of creative heroes.
The charge of this paper was to find Beethoven’s influence in Wright’s work. Unfortunately, a simple comparison of each man’s works is difficult since Beethoven’s music does not exist in wood and stone nor does Wright’s architecture exist as a wave in the air. And yet Wright considered music and architecture to be kindred endeavors.

Eaton (2000) has studied Wright’s stained glass compositions and concluded that they were designed using a sort of musical language. He goes so far as to say Wright “wanted to emulate Beethoven” and that with his window compositions Wright “came as close as any architect in recorded history” to achieving architecture as frozen music (p. 69). His analysis is based on the recognition of geometric ratios found throughout the windows of the Meyer May house. The dimensions of the individual glass pieces tend to create simple mathematical ratios such as 2:1 and 3:2.

All musicians encounter these same ratios whether they realize it or not. Because a pitch is simply a frequency of sound waves, any interval between pitches can be expressed as the ratio of their respective frequencies. For the intervals found in the typical scale (the foundation of Western harmony) these ratios reduce very simply – an octave to 2:1, a perfect fifth, 3:2; a perfect fourth, 4:3; etc. That Wright’s windows exhibit the same language of ratios is remarkable. Furthermore, Eaton asserts that Wright used this musical sequence as an “ordering device.” Indeed, Wright once wrote that he had “evolved a whole language of [his] own” when designing his window patterns (as cited in Eaton, 2000, pg. 57).

That Wright appears to have used a harmonic language in his windows is amazing, but that alone is not concrete evidence of Beethoven’s influence. Nothing about the presence of musical ratios in Wright’s window designs proves Beethoven – or any specific composer – was emulated during the design process. Eaton himself believes that Wright’s glass compositions were not calculated but intuited, a kind of “inspired guesswork” (pg. 69). This suggests that Wright’s ‘evolved language’ was simply an effective technique for creating visual harmony rather than literal mathematical/musical harmony. The fact that Wright’s technique contains musical ratios is probably serendipitous.

By the same reasoning it is impossible to read into any of Wright’s works and positively identify the influence of a particular composer. Fortunately in the case of Beethoven, Wright explained his admiration. In a previously quoted passage Wright described Beethoven’s music as striving for entity, maintaining oneness in diversity, containing depth in design, and preserving repose in the final expression of the whole (Wright, F.L., 1943, 422). Wright venerated these qualities because he believed them to be at the intersection of architecture and music; qualities that Beethoven had mastered and Wright could learn. These qualities make it clear that the influence of Beethoven is not to be found through study of any single element of Wright’s work but all the elements acting together – the essence of a Beethoven symphony!

There is no way of breaking down Wright’s work into constituent parts in search of Beethoven’s influence without losing the essence of Wright’s appreciation. A Beethoven symphony was a real thing to Wright; he called it an edifice of sound,
like a designed object. He appreciated it because of its quality of design, its ability to absorb listeners in a space uniquely Beethoven’s. Exactly what the designed object was – a piece of music in this case – was secondary. The true influence of Beethoven is found when Wright imagined what a space could be, the enthusiasm with which he approached shaping it, and how he intended that space to be of the same quality as Beethoven’s.

Wright recognized the link between music and architecture to be the common mind required of the artist. But he also accepted that the embodiment of each art form is very different in the real world. Wright may have suggested that architecture and music share the same soul, but he never confused the scope of each. Wright never went so far as to call himself a great musician, only that he might have been if not for his life as an architect.

Wright stated explicitly in his writings that Beethoven influenced his work, but the influence is invisible – a rather unsatisfying conclusion to reach given Wright’s zeal for Beethoven’s music. Still, invisible influence is no less powerful. If any of Wright’s projects could be said to strive for entity, maintain oneness in diversity, contain depth in design, and preserve repose in the final expression of the whole, then they exhibit the influence of Beethoven.

References