

Teaching Jazz

STEFANO FERRIAN

Email: sfdenoize@gmail.com
 Web: <https://stefanoferrian.com>

Keywords: rule-following, improvisation, conversation, jazz education, spontaneous order, philosophy of education, tacit knowledge.

I am a musician and a composer and I have spent most of my life studying the instrumental techniques and the musical theory of several codified musical genres.

This experience has brought me to the view that the academic attitude is nothing but a modern musical ghetto whereby teachers share a received knowledge with students that receive it passively and uncritically—since it is assumed to be correct. A scholarly system when applied to music often even determines human tastes.

For example the Western musical distinction between *consonant* and *dissonant* taught in basic theory and referring to intervals, is a kind of a psychological violence that overrides the fact that each ear is different because something that sounds *consonant* to one's ear can sound *dissonant* to others' ear. If we accept the definition that *music is the art of expressing one's inner feelings through the modulation of sound* we should understand and teach music as a way of sharing knowledge but by making use of individual perspectives and visions, instead of merely teaching music as the banal application of rules.

Frank Barrett (1998), for example, wrote about the interaction between rules and creativity in jazz suggesting that certain cognitive processes focus on self-monitoring and focused attention while others may be associated with defocused, free-floating attention that permits spontaneous unplanned associations, and sudden insights or realizations. The latter kind of musical interaction relies on a set of rules or structures that are minimal and which allow maximum flexibility of association embracing errors and open-ended outcomes. Thinking about the implications for organizational learning, Barrett contends that “too much reliance on learned patterns (habitual or automatic thinking) tends to limit the risk-taking necessary for creative improvisation; on the other hand too much regulation and control restrict the interplay of musical ideas” (Barrett 1998, p. 607).

In this article I propose a distinction between *rules* and *directions* and I develop some thoughts on the way jazz is

taught today. I am convinced that today's jazz education all too often puts forward a conception of rules that in fact hinders any kind of communication between musicians. My proposal is that we should teach people how to reach a common understanding, rather than *what* phrases to play. The kind of rules—or directions—that permits this kind of interaction are not specific but general. David Liebman (2009) explains why we should be concerned about jazz education:

To me the most important lesson learned in jazz playing is how to cooperate and work within a group situation while maintaining and exploring individuality.

But I wonder, is today's jazz education still promoting individuality? There is a big difference between jazz that grows as a spontaneous order in a specific context/area and the institutionalization of rules that become too rigid to permit any creative change.

TEACHING JAZZ AND THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF POWER

How is jazz taught today? Is jazz education of any use? One of the biggest challenges for a teacher, or better yet, a mentor, is how to share their knowledge without invading the “choice area” of the student. In fact, jazz, and music in general, can make minds more elastic, focused and trained.¹ But we should stop and think about what is the method to develop and share the knowledge that is contained in jazz music. Most academic jazz courses around today only offer a fixed mechanism of learning through rhythmical, melodic and harmonic kinds of patterns. The problem is not the pattern itself: what is fundamental is how we present the pattern to our students. Our life is full of patterns and routines we repeat day in day out.

A teacher should show a student how to “walk” properly but afterwards the student should be free to develop their

own path-making personal choices. This means that sharing a technique shouldn't provide any content. The content should be developed by the student. This is not generally the case with the current way of teaching jazz which is typically a dogmatic drilling of techniques and their applications.

When I was young and had not yet learned the "right" notes to play, improvisation was natural and joyful and playing an instrument represented a passageway into the universe of sound where I experienced something of the eternal in my daily life. Later, when I went to school to study jazz, improvisation became more of a technique for applying the correct scales to chord changes. (Fewell 2016)

Nowadays we teach students not only how to "walk" but also what's the right path to follow. This outlook simply smothers personal taste and constricts self-determination—the most important aspects to individual development. Therefore, through jazz education, we are controlling and inhibiting the would-be musician.

As I have been a student in a jazz academy I am well-placed to provide a personal account. What I discovered over the years is that there was a total lack of empathy in the sense that the musicians around me displayed an inability to play without the rigid application of rules. Whenever I found myself in a rehearsal room for an "improvised session" with other students there were nothing but questions such as: "which song/tune?" or "what key?" Students spend years studying and practicing standard music patterns which work fine in predetermined situations where everyone knows the rules of the game. This game can repeat itself all over again precisely because individuality has been suppressed. Moreover, this game will always deliver the same result, since the result is predetermined. The "scholarization" of jazz, as I call it, based on fixed schemes, means that everyone follows a standardized way to express oneself.

The inhibition to freely express one's personality is a direct result of the scholarization of jazz. Consider this: when one takes a couple of little kids and ask them to play random instruments, a cacophony ensues. The children will certainly not ask one anything about the "modality"; they will just play and express themselves freely. So one has to wonder how is it possible that a trained musician will come over as handicapped if you ask them to play freely? The answer is this: because today's scholarized jazz education teaches musicians the way one must play rather than of the

means of how to play. We're teaching the content and not the way to let one develop his or her own personal content.

Today's jazz is taught in a way that freezes the hierarchy between the teacher and the student. This is why, most of the time, we hear technical players that sound almost the same, simply because they limit themselves to the same known choices, which means to not take risks or personal decisions. When we teach patterns as the definitive way to play jazz, we are in effect merely producing copies. This has not always been the case. Historically, jazz was one of the most "contaminated" of genres. The kind of jazz that emerged before the 1970s was a result of interactions between personalities who were composers. From the 1970s up until now, mainstream jazz has been reproduced by performers who play a decoded kind of jazz where the rules of the game were already predetermined. The first jazz era rested upon individuals who, in fact, wouldn't had the chance to describe themselves as composers in today's institutionalized era, an era when the composer needs to be an academic scholar. Instead, music has often found pioneers among amateur musicians who were more open-minded and free to develop themselves instead of merely developing prefabricated musical genres. These amateur musicians often invented the musical genres we hand down to our students today.

RULES AND IMPROVISATION

What's most important about rules is being able to discriminate the quality of the rule, one worthy of respect. I want to suggest that while rules and guidelines are two separate worlds, sometimes we can find some hidden rules smuggled in with the guidelines or directions. While the rules are there in order to control our impulses, one cannot improvise by way of a mere application of rules. Is there any kind of rules that can let us express freely? Rules are and should be important in a musician's life during those endless hours spent on practicing. Rules can be fundamental in acquiring a proper mastery of the instrument. It is here that I propose a distinction between rules and directions. The concept of a rule brings along a hierarchical point of view which reveals the will to control the ones who should follow the rules. This mechanism creates different levels of power. The "teacher" who accepted and learnt the rules himself, is the one who "owns the rules" that should be learnt by the student and should accept the rules unquestioningly. In fact, a mere application of rules makes any kind of evolution impossible since every rule is based upon an obsolete

kind of knowledge handed down from the past and music, as the arts in general, should be actual to be honest. It is my contention that a good teacher should show just what the possible directions are available at a given moment. The distinction between rules and directions provides a different perspective: a direction is non-instrumental in character.

From this perspective it is more appropriate to indicate to a person who shares the knowledge as a guide or a mentor, rather than a teacher or a master. The position of power held by the person who shares the knowledge is critical to the results we can expect. There's a big difference between the sharing of an experience and the passing on of a prescription. A good guide is the researcher who puts new questions on the table because perhaps an answer can be found in a different perspective. There is no hierarchical relationship in this situation because the guide shares the knowledge as one would with an open argument where the student can also be an active participant.

The posing of questions without having the answers to hand is at the base of an evolutionary process that is not in any way meant to reject the rules. Within this perspective, the existing rules are just a starting point for discussing new points of view which can be developed, from time to time, by the student as well. The answer is open-ended and should not be specified by the guide's opinion. If the destination is specified, one will get there fast but one will be denied the possibility to assimilate things and have a full experience of the journey. If a direction is indicated, one will have to negotiate the way by oneself.

Whenever a musician confronts an impulse, there are some possible responses: first, the musician already knows how to react, or second, the musician does not know how to react but will probably be able to negotiate the situation better if familiar with the "question/answer process" (I will expand on this process below). Finally, the musician can find the answer in their "book of rules", a passive way to react to an event. In such a case, there is no real decision and it is an easy way to deny any responsibility. Here's an easy analogy: try to imagine that the question could be represented by the topography of the surface on which we stand. The musician can adapt better to a novel kind of situation if they have walked on many different surfaces in the past.

From this perspective, musical genres are just different kinds of surfaces. One can readily walk on a beach and in a forest but maybe one has never walked on a rocky surface. Of course, my ability to adapt to different surfaces is connected to my talent in walking but also on my experience in walking on different kinds of surface. Knowledge (taken

as a kind of tacit experience) is the key to adapting as fast as possible. Consequently, the best solution is to know how to walk in any possible way. This is difficult to express propositionally when trying to cover the countless possible situations. Knowledge that does not include the unexpected as a possibility is useless in the real world.

Since music is a way to communicate, we should think about how conversation, similar to an improvised music session, works. The question is "what are the useful rules to make a conversation possible?" A fundamental rule of conversation is to listen *before* answering. At this point an answer can follow as an original idea or, on the other hand, by a vulgar application of rules that often seem out of context. If we extrapolate this metaphor of conversation to a musical interaction, we can conclude that:

- Experience is a kind of constraint release.
- If one does not have any reason to respond or if a response is not already in ones available options, just keep silent and try to find a good response to the idea or musical "question" presented.
- To be focused in a conversation or in a musical improvisation means to be balanced. One should not try to offer a forced answer to a question.
- What is really difficult is to maintain balance in a silent situation. Most of the time the context is the first source of pointless ideas and questions. A musician should prioritize the questions to be answered and ideas to be addressed.

What is more important than rules is the role of the musician. Experience can teach us how to let the music flow in the best way possible. Great players always say that the "music flows by itself", it "simply happens": this attitude can be easily suppressed with a mere application of rules. Ideally, rules should help the development of one's personal experience (becoming the person one wants to become) and self-determination (deciding how to go about it). Unfortunately, rules are also an easy way to control people and that's exactly the way jazz music seems to be developing these days. To meet up "for a jam" in the jazz era meant research and conversation. Today, in most of cases, a jam session means nothing but the application of all those decoded rules to "improvise" properly, the right scales on chord progressions. One is not considered a poet if one just publically recites old poems each time: a poet supposedly writes their own poems. We teach people to become pris-

oners of rules though we should be wise enough to teach to people to search for an accord via their own perspective.

IMPROVISATION AND VOCABULARY

Improvisation is nothing but a sequence of questions and answers. What makes the difference in this process is the *vocabulary* of the subjects involved in the conversation. We think as we speak, which means that the quality of our ideas is directly connected to our vocabulary. An educated vocabulary means that there might be many ways to answer a question. The flip side is that education can be a powerful tool to control peoples' minds. This occurs when one couples a vocabulary with given ideas which is exactly what happens with the chord progressions where students have spend years practicing prefabricated answers, consequently nullifying any chance to develop a personalized perspective. At some point though, prefabricated answers become the students' personal perspective.

This process develops when the vocabulary hides the content. If we want to promote individualism, we should educate and train people to acquire and develop a personal perspective. It is not a mystery that educational organizations generally promote given content. These days, the main subject of the conversation we call jazz mostly offers prefabricated answers making the conversation predictable. This has nothing to do with what we call individualism or subjectivism. This is what happens when the vocabulary is also the carrier of the content.

A staid vocabulary makes people predictable while destroying the possibilities of an original movement to emerge. One of the most important things for a musician in a group setting is to listen to other musicians, which becomes difficult if one has already put answers in the students' mind. If the answers are already there, that musician will only hear what is happening through the prism of what he or she already knows. On the other hand, if we can share a rich vocabulary that is devoid of categorization, content or stereotypes, we can reach a space where a real conversation can take place with unpredictable results, making it possible for an individualized perspective to take shape.

A genuine conversation makes it possible to find an accord between different vibrations, the basis of unity, while different vibrations form the basis of motion. To find unity in different vibrations is the biggest virtue for a modern musician. A genuine conversation is in never-ending motion: on the other hand, a faux "conversation" made out of predetermined questions and prefabricated answers is im-

movable—this is what Oakeshott and Hayek had in mind regarding their critique of rationalism. This conversational idea is what jazz is all about, or at least it is an important part of it. It's an emerging movement based on ideas in perpetual motion. A good musical education should teach people how to reach an accord (an emergent agreement) with themselves and with their vibrations finding real inner contact with their deepest feelings. This idea can, after all, be found in the etymology of the word *mùsica* which is the art of expressing inner feelings through the modulation of sound.

JAZZ, VISION AND ABSTRACTION

Playing music is just one of the innumerable ways to express one's feelings. Rules, taken as the content, can become an obstacle to letting the musician share their vision freely. If we assume that everyone is different, it becomes impossible to specify a single rule that should work for a large number of individuals. The flow of emotions should be natural rather than as a result of an application of rules. The problem comes when someone tries to codify this natural flow, making for an apriori and moribund dynamic: rules merely become the content.

This is exactly what happens with jazz. In the golden era, music was a natural flow of musicians' feelings and perspectives but once codified, it became nothing more than a mere application of the right pattern or scale on some chord progression. The most important thing to be taught is to develop a personalized way to express one's feelings and share one's perspectives, a view that sharply contrasts with the popular tendency of teaching a standardized way of approaching one's inner voice. There are just two options: agree or disagree. Dissent for a future agreement/(and or synthesis) is the origin of jazz, dissent here meaning the creation of an alternative to mainstream consciousness which is, in fact, at the base of what we call evolution. Evolution is driven through random interactions and collisions. On the other hand, predetermined orderly interaction makes any kind of action predictable because people are trained to react in some specific ways that are often quite different from a natural reaction which is often unpredictable. To view jazz as a mere application of rules is the best way to make it disappear.

It is my impression that at some level, the process of categorization legitimates various forms of collective tension—i.e. in-group vs. out-group. The trick is to create exclusive groups that limit the interaction among people with the

purpose of making people's actions predictable. Through such categorization, the population will be divided in many different smaller groups of rule following agents instead of a large group constituted by thinking individuals. The awareness that jazz was a big social movement constituted by musicians would thus be hidden by the rules spread by its institutionalization until the point when every musician interested in jazz will just propel the movement as a mere application of rules on chord progression. This has been happening for a while.

The institutionalization of jazz has been advanced through the teacher-student relationship and has reduced any chance for the student to challenge the rules since the teacher usually acts like a high priest revealing to his students a dogmatic kind of knowledge through the mantra: "listen and repeat". This approach empowers the teacher who is looking for disciples while, on the other hand, puts the student in the comfortable passivity of receiving knowledge without questioning or thinking. It is my impression that through the current way of teaching jazz, we efficiently annihilate any kind of ability to play with all the musicians that have been "educated".

A common idea among good improvisers is that you "need to forget yourself while playing", otherwise one will just show off one's musical chops. As a river flows without the idea of flowing, so too good improvisers play without thinking of playing. How is this possible? The only way to do that is to bring one's vision, the instrument, and the context closer to one another. To make the distance between one's vision and the instrument smaller, the instrument should be like an extension of their own embodiment. To facilitate the access to one's inner vision, the musician should be able to free their mind from most conditioned ideas or knowledge. An honest player works at an unconscious level. The musician must always ask: "Am I playing for myself, for the audience, or for the music?" It is quite difficult to find someone who does not play to show off. But to forget oneself while playing means to let the music flow through the musician's means of expression. The musician is nothing than an optical lens that filters music. In an improvisation group of musicians, the music takes place instantly (which is sometimes also called instant composing). In this situation one really cannot interact with others using patterns, without sounding out of context. Like a conversation, everyone is free to interact at any time and in this particular case, less is usually more. "Less is more" is a virtue: a short, focused and balanced answer is more desirable than a long stream of musical rambling that shows off one's grammatical skills.

Taking decisions means assuming responsibility and managing errors. These are some of the most important aspects of a free-thinking person. These two aspects are mostly absent from the game if the musician already knows what is coming next in the chord progression. In such a case, the audience witnesses nothing but an exercise. Way too often we teach people that to play an instrument is much like solving a riddle. But this attitude simply makes it impossible for a student to search for and articulate their perspective. Rather, it incentivizes the musician to conform to a bigger more commonly shared perspective. As an antidote, Steve Lacy in his book *Findings* (1995) exhorts repetition in the following sense: practice the same interval as long as you can. Lacy himself used to practice the same interval the whole day long, trying to take c and c# and practice it for 8 hours. What is the result of this exercise? *Abstraction*.

Abstraction is my advice to neutralize the problems I've identified in the teaching of jazz today. Abstraction is a good way to acquire a different perspective of the same sound. The ability to abstract is fundamental in order not to feel excessively limited. A simple exercise like this will work with sounds instead of reading scales and their applications on chord progressions. The musician should be an expert on the sound of their instrument. Repetition is fundamental to train one's ear which is the only medium between one's inner vision and what is happening beyond. This connection can be recalled anytime instantly without the need to think about it. The ability to abstract means bringing action to an instinctive level.

NOTES

- 1 Neurologists have found that music reinforces the neuronal connections in the human brain: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S0kCUss0g9Q&t=3s>

REFERENCES

- Barrett, F. J. (1998). Coda—Creativity and Improvisation in Jazz and Organizations: Implications for Organizational Learning. *Organization Science* 9 (5): 605–622.
- Fewell, G. (2016). *Outside Music Inside Voices: Dialogues on Improvisation and the Spirit of Creative Music*. Italy: Mimesis International.
- Lacy, S. (1995). *Findings: My Experience with the Soprano Saxophone*. Paris: Outre Mesure.
- Liebman, D. (2009). Educational Articles. http://davidliebman.com/home/ed_articles/why-jazz-education-short-version/.