

# Education as Jazz:

*Interdisciplinary Sketches  
on a New Metaphor*

Edited by

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In Memory of Marco Tamburini

a Musician, a Teacher,  
an Improviser

a Friend



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## CHAPTER FOUR

### GOING BY THE RULE AND GOING BY THE SOUND

MATTEO PLEBANI AND GABRIELE TOMASI

According to a widely shared definition, jazz improvisation is a “spontaneous creation of music in performance” (Monson 2002, p.114).

The definition formulates the idea of improvisation as the act of composing in the moment, namely during the performance itself.

Saxophonist Steve Lacy has vividly expressed what this means. Asked to explain in fifteen seconds the difference between composition and improvisation, he is reported to have answered as follows: “In fifteen seconds the difference between composition and improvisation is that in composition you have all the time you want to decide what to say in fifteen seconds, while in improvisation you have fifteen seconds”.<sup>1</sup>

This view has intriguing implications. For example, it suggests that in the case of improvisation, the conventional distinction between composer and performer does not hold.<sup>2</sup>

However, it is not this aspect of the definition that concerns us here; rather, we will focus on the characterization of the creative process involved in improvisation as being spontaneous.

The assumption that a high degree of spontaneity characterizes improvisation is plausible. One can ascribe spontaneity to improvisation

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<sup>1</sup> Bailey, 1992, p.140. Different versions of the idea are in circulation. Pianist Bill Evans is reported to have said that when observing an improvisation, one sees “the process of making one minute’s music in one minute time, whereas when you compose you can take one minute’s music and take three months to compose it”.

<sup>2</sup> This is somehow connected to the fact that it could be argued that in jazz there is no work in the sense of European classical music. Roughly, one could claim that while composition results in a score, and when it is performed the music is somehow already created, improvisation is a creative process; insofar as it is a central feature of jazz, jazz music does not result in a work. Hagberg (2002) has argued that neither sheets nor the transcriptions of a performance are scores.

without considering improvisation as a kind of *creatio ex nihilo* or claiming that it excludes aspects of routine. Obviously, it is possible for a musician to improvise a melody somehow *ex nihilo* if this means utilizing only her own intellectual and emotional resources and moving from a mere sound occasion.

In most cases, however, when jazz musicians improvise, they start from something: the so-called “standards” (but also songs or melodies of other traditions) may offer a musical sketch, that is, a melodic line and a harmonic structure to improvise on. Independently of this, and despite the fact that in the performance every aspect of the music is at the musician’s disposal,<sup>3</sup> the idea that improvisation is completely free might be misleading.

In an interview with Jacques Derrida, saxophonist and composer Ornette Coleman says that when he used to play free jazz, people believed he simply took his saxophone and played what came to his mind without following any rules, which – he commented – obviously was not the case.<sup>4</sup> Thus, we are faced with the question of how and in what sense improvisation can be simultaneously spontaneous and rule-governed.

We deal with this question in this paper.

Drawing upon certain aspects of Wittgenstein’s so-called “rule-following considerations”, we show that the paradoxical character of improvisation is apparent. Not only does spontaneous playing have conditions in training and learning that presuppose rules, but improvisation itself, as an activity, is ruled-governed as Coleman claims. This will be our first theme. The exposition of this theme will be followed by a Wittgenstein “development”.

Our second theme is the social character of rule-following. With regard to this, we first present some of Wittgenstein’s remarks on the topic and then consider the corresponding aspects in the jazz world. According to the musical structure of theme and exposition or variation, we will close with a Wittgensteinian coda on rule-following.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, in his famous recording of “Body and Soul” from 1939, Coleman Hawkins hints at the original melody of the piece only in the very first moments. He then improvises, exploiting elements of the melodic line, altering the intervals, adding or subtracting notes, etc. Improvisation does not always go that far. Sometimes musicians stick to an idea and try a solo again and again, barely changing it. On these aspects cf. Szwed 2000, ch. VI.

<sup>4</sup> “Alias”, weekly supplement of the Italian newspaper *Il Manifesto*, 15/11/2014, p.12 (the interview dates back to 1997). On the discussion between Coleman and Derrida cf. Ramshaw 2006.



## 1. First theme: improvisation, learning, and freedom

The definition of jazz improvisation as a spontaneous creation of music in performance points to an essential character of this activity.

The creation of music in performance, as David P. Schweikard notes, requires the intentional development and realization of musical ideas *during* improvised playing.<sup>5</sup>

No matter what idea a solo player or a group has of the outcome of their activity, some features of both the activity itself and of its outcome are determined in its performance (cf. Alperson, 2010; p.273).

Speaking of spontaneity in this context seems to mean that a soloist's creation of music rests on the ideas that arise in her during the performance, obeying a kind of inspiration – at least if we consider the soloist abstracting from her interaction with other members of the ensemble.<sup>6</sup> However, since acting from inspiration and following a rule “are surely not the same” (*PI*, 232), this representation obscures the fact that improvisation is also an activity that depends on rules in many aspects.

There is a rather obvious sense in which improvisation should follow some rules. No matter how much room is left for reshaping a standard or other musical material – namely a melody with its rhythm, tempo, and harmonic structure – from which the improviser moves, not all melodic figures, blue notes, or chord substitutions fit in the harmonic structure. It goes without saying that before one plays in an original way one has to play in a “correct” and expressive way. And what fits or does not fit (what is correct/incorrect) is presumably established according to some rule. In the absence of a rule, speaking of correctness is pointless.

Actually, in a sense one could maintain that in jazz music there are no rules, if we assume that rules contain indications given once and for all that make it possible to know in advance what is appropriate to play at a certain moment and context, and what is better to avoid.

In principle, there is no algorithm for deciding whether or not a performance is still of the corresponding standard or melody. However, improvisation does not happen in a vacuum, without a context or personal background.

The capacity to improvise depends on learning a wide range of rules and very specific and complex abilities. Musicians need knowledge of harmony and styles in order to master the voicing; besides this, they

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Schweikard, 2014; p.65.

<sup>6</sup> On this cf. Schweikard, 2014; p.66.

should have a mastery of the instrument that allows for automatism of movements as well as knowledge of the potentialities of its timbre. They should also have transformed these musical capacities or skills into a kind of habit that allows for free expression. Saxophonist Steve Lacy does an excellent job of highlighting the relation between freedom, on the one hand, and learning and training, on the other:

“I’m attracted to improvisation because of something I value. That is a freshness, a certain quality, which can only be obtained by improvisation, something you cannot possibly get from writing. It is something to do with the ‘edge’. Always being on the brink of the unknown and being prepared for the leap. And when you go out there you have all your years of preparation and all your sensibilities and your prepared means but it is a leap into the unknown. If through that leap you find something then it has a value which I don’t think can be found in any other way. I place a higher value on that than on what you can prepare. But I am also hooked into what you can prepare, especially in the way that it can take you to the edge. What I write is to take you to the edge safely so that you can go on out there and find this other stuff. But really it is this other stuff that interests me and I think it forms the basic stuff of jazz.”<sup>7</sup>

Hard training and preparation help to master a musical language and develop the ability to identify the salient features of a musical context and the appropriate answer to these features; that is, to recognize what really works in a certain improvisation.<sup>8</sup>

Surely, improvisation is not an activity of the same kind as playing a game with explicitly defined rules. It may even have aspects that do not involve any kind of definite rules; however, improvisers do not simply sit at their piano or drums or take up their saxophone, trumpet, or double bass and play what comes to their mind without following any rules.

Things do not go that way in a Don-Cherry-type situation or in a context that allows the performer less freedom.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Bailey, 1992; pp.57-58.

<sup>8</sup> By the way, if there were no rules to *explain* improvisation, it would not be possible to teach it; however, this is contradicted by the many courses of improvisation in colleges of music.

<sup>9</sup> We are thinking of what Steve Lacy recalls about Ornette Coleman and Don Cherry: “I remember at that time he [Coleman] said, very carefully, ‘Well, you just have a certain amount of space and you put what you want in it’. And that was a revelation. [...] But I think the key figure was Don Cherry. Cherry was freer, in a way [...] his playing was really free. He used to come over to my house in ’59 and ’60, around that time, and he used to tell me, ‘Well, let’s play’. So I said ‘OK. What shall we play’. And there it was. The dilemma. The problem. It was a terrible

Each jazz performance has an intrinsic flexibility. If a jazz trio plays a standard, the musicians somehow negotiate it *in* and *through* the performance;<sup>10</sup> all the musical parameters are somehow at their disposal. Still, not every move is possible, and if someone claimed that jazz performers play without basing their action on rules, one could always respond that they still play according to some rule.

If we grant them some knowledge of what is correct or appropriate to play,<sup>11</sup> we should make room for rules. With regard to this, Wittgenstein offers some interesting suggestions.

### 1.1 A Wittgensteinian exposition

Wittgenstein pointed out a puzzling aspect of our usual way of thinking about rules. We tend to conceive of a rule as something that divides all possible responses to a given situation into two classes: the correct responses and the incorrect ones.

The rule is supposed to settle, for a potentially infinite number of cases, which moves comply with it and which do not. But if this is correct, how is this possible for us to understand and apply a rule? Where are we to find, in a rule, the criterion to determine whether or not a given move conforms to it? How can we *read off* the formulation of the rule its requirements for an indefinite number of cases of application? The relation between a rule and its correct applications raises a question:

“[...] we might ask: how does it happen that someone who now applies the general rule to a further number is still following this rule? How does it happen that no further rule was necessary to allow him to apply the general rule to this case in spite of the fact that this case was not mentioned in the general rule? And so we are puzzled that we can't bridge over this abyss between the individual numbers and the general proposition” (PG, II, Ch. II, §10, p.282).

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moment. I didn't know what to do. And it took me about five years to work out of that. To break through that wall. I took a few years to get to the point where I could just play. It was a process that was partly playing tunes and playing tunes and finally getting to the point where it didn't seem to be important and it didn't do anything for you, to play the tunes. So you just drop the tunes. And you just played” (Bailey 1992, pp.55-56).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Feige, 2014; p 35.

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of the question of correctness in jazz cf. Strobach, 2007; pp.113-114 and Bertinetto, 2014.

So, how do we apply a general rule to particular cases? In other words, “[...] how can a rule show me what I have to do at this point?” (*PI*, 198).

Any rule has been applied only a finite number of times. There are always new applications we have not been confronted with. How are we to proceed when confronted with such cases? Our past applications of the rule do not determine how to apply it to new cases. Every finite pattern of use can be continued in an infinite number of ways, and no initial segment of a sequence can uniquely identify the intended sequence. For instance, imagine a pupil confronted with a sequence of even numbers (2, 4, 6, 8 ...) up to 1000:

“Now we get the pupil to continue a series (say +2) beyond 1000 – and he writes 1000, 1004, 1008, 1012.

We say to him: “Look what you’ve done!” – He doesn’t understand. We say: “You were meant to add always *two* look how you began the series!” – He answers: “Yes, isn’t it right? I thought that was how I was meant to do it.” – Or suppose he pointed to the series and said: “But I went on in the same way.” – It would now be no use to say: “But can’t you see ...?” – and repeat the old examples and explanations. [...]

Such a case would present similarities with one in which a person naturally reacted to the gesture of pointing with the hand by looking in the direction of the line from finger-tip to wrist, not from wrist to finger-tip” (*PI*, 185).

One cannot extrapolate from a finite pattern of the application of a rule the way in which to extend that rule to new cases, nor can we hope to fill the gap between a rule and its applications with other rules.

If we need rule  $R_1$  to apply rule  $R_0$  to case  $c$ , why don’t we need an additional rule,  $R_2$ , to apply  $R_1$  to the pair  $\{R, c\}$ ? And why don’t we need another rule  $R_3$  to apply  $R_2$  to the triple  $\{R_1, R_0, c\}$ ? We would end up with an infinite regress. If we needed rules to interpret the rules, the very process of following a rule would never get off the ground (cf. *PI*, 198).

The same problem can also be appreciated if we look at the issue of how to apply the rule to a particular case from the perspective of the rule-follower.

Sure, every formulation of a rule can be misinterpreted: nothing guarantees that the words used to formulate it are understood correctly. But we cannot always solve this problem by offering an interpretation of the rule.

Interpretations are also offered as sequences of words (*Z*, p.229), which helps clarify the meaning of the formulation of the rule only to the extent to which they are understood correctly. And there is no way to force someone to correctly understand the words you are using to formulate

your interpretation of the rule: they are as liable to be misunderstood as the original formulation of the rule.

So, the conclusion is that “there is a way of grasping a rule which is not an interpretation, but which is exhibited in what we call ‘obeying the rule’ and ‘going against it’ in actual cases” (*PI*, 202).

But what does following the rule without interpreting it consist of? Is it a sort of intuition regarding the way to go? Paragraph 186 of the *Philosophical Investigation* is pretty clear about this:

“What you are saying, then, comes to this: a new insight – intuition – is needed at every step to carry out the order ‘Add n’ (+ n) correctly [...]. It would almost be more correct to say, not that an intuition was needed at every stage, but that a new decision was needed at every stage” (*PI*, 186).

With some adjustment, Wittgenstein’s point might be valid for improvisation too.

The player has to somehow “add notes” correctly. Some kind of alertness or responsiveness is required here. She has to pay attention or follow what she plays. Somehow, she “knows” where she is going (cf. Hamilton, 2007b; pp.106-108), and this means that she is following some rules even if she is not playing on their basis; that is, even if those rules do not explicitly guide her action.<sup>12</sup>

Even the very idea that no rule can catch the knowledge of what to play in a precise moment does not imply that there are no rules about how to play.

Jerrold Levinson observes that “improvisers follow what they have just played by means of playing something else”, and he points out that what is central to this kind of following is not keeping track of what already exists but bringing something into being at each step (Levinson, 2006; pp.216-217).

Improvisers can only build upon the steps they have just taken (cf. Brown, 2000; p.114; Berliner, 1994; p.192). Very often, what they do is “probing and testing possibilities latent in the music they are making” (Brown, 1996; p.364).

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<sup>12</sup> There is a crucial distinction between acting in accordance with a rule and acting on the basis of a rule. A musician might play according to the rules of harmony without basing her action on such rules. Rules might either be action-guiding or have a mere explicative function (cf. *PI*, p.82). Obviously, one cannot follow a rule that she does not know in the way she follows a signpost (cf. *PI*, p.198) or obeys an order (cf. *PI*, p.206).

However, this is possible only if they are reflectively present to the music they play; if they can sense the implications of the music played just a few seconds before and respond to its possible developments.

Reflection takes place while players push forward to explore musical ideas; in a sense, they think while they play or *in* playing, namely, in the decisions they take.

Actually, just because improvisers must go on to do something, they cannot help but make immediate decisions about how to go ahead – where falling silent also becomes part of the music created. For improvisers as well, it seems correct to say that what is needed at every stage is not “an intuition” but “a new decision” (*PI*, 186).

Admittedly, it is not an easy task to make sense of Wittgenstein’s words. There is a huge body of literature discussing how to better construe Wittgenstein’s position on rule-following.

It is controversial to try and exactly formulate Wittgenstein’s point here, and many share the feeling that trying to formulate Wittgenstein’s point with exactness is somehow betraying it. However, what Wittgenstein was opposed to in this case is far less controversial: the image of rules as “rails to infinity”.

Wittgenstein poses the following question: “Whence comes the idea that the beginning of a series is a visible section of rails invisibly laid to infinity?” (*PI*, 218). In other words, Wittgenstein is opposing the temptation to think that the correct result is fixed by the meaning of the words employed in the formulation of the rules:

“The right step is the one that accords with the order – as it was *meant*” – So when you gave the order “Add 2” you meant that he was to write 1002 after 1000 – and did you also mean that he should write 1868 after 1866, and 100036 after 100034, and so on – an infinite number of such propositions? – “No: what I meant was, that he should write the next but one number after every number that he wrote; and from this all those propositions follow in turn.” – But that is just what is in question: what, at any stage, does follow from that sentence. Or, again, what, at any stage we are to call “being in accord” with that sentence (and with the meaning you then put into the sentence – whatever that may have consisted in)” (*PI*, 186).

“But if you want to remain in accord with the rules you *must* go this way.” – Not at all, I call *this* “accord”. – “Then you have changed the meaning of the word ‘accord’, or the meaning of the rule.” – No; – who says what “change” and “remaining the same” mean here?” (*RFM*, I, §113)

It is not the rule that determines, in a rails-to-infinity way, its correct applications, but rather it is the acknowledgment of a certain response as the correct way to apply the rule that determines the identity of the rule which is followed: “I have a particular concept of the rule. If in this sense one follows it, then from that number one can only arrive at this one’. That is a spontaneous decision” (*RFM*, VI, §24).

*From the logical point of view*, such a spontaneous decision is *free*, even though it is still constrained by extra-logical factors.<sup>13</sup>

There is nothing in the meaning of the terms we use to formulate a rule that *logically* forces us to apply the rule in a certain way to a given case.

The criterion to correctly apply the rule in specific cases is not given independently of our *practice* of ratifying some performances as correct applications of the rule: “obeying a rule is a practice” (*PI*, 202). And, as we are going to see below, it is an essentially *social* practice. To put it boldly: it is only the process of applying the rule (and our acknowledging that one and the same result is the correct one) that determines what is to count, in particular cases, as the correct application of the rule. We suggest that roughly the same holds true for jazz improvisation.

## 2. Second theme: rule-following as social practice

It is worth stressing at least two ideas connected with Wittgenstein’s conviction that rule-following is a practice:

(i) Rule-following is not just an intellectual act: it is not a “recognition” or an “intuition” of a pre-existing logical connection between the rule and its applications – rather, it is more akin to an act of spontaneous decision;<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Frascolla, 1994; p.120: “This picture, in which a total uniformity of behaviour from the anthropological point of view is a *pendant* of an absolute freedom from the logical point of view, is, in my opinion, the first component of Wittgenstein’s conception of rules.”

<sup>14</sup> How rule-following is like an act of decision is suggested by the following remark: “In all language there is a bridge between the sign and its application. No one can make this for us; we have to bridge the gap ourselves. No explanation ever saves the jump, because any further explanation will itself need a jump” (*LWL*, p.67). The act-of-decision analogy should be taken with some care, though: “When I say ‘I decide spontaneously’, naturally that does not mean: ‘I consider which number would really be the best one here and then plump for ...’” (*RFM*, VI, §24). Furthermore, “It is no act of insight, intuition, which makes us use the rule as we do at the particular point of the series. It would be less confusing to call it an act of decision, though this too is misleading, for nothing like an act of decision must take place, but possibly just an act of writing or speaking” (*BB*, II, p.5).

(ii) Rule-following is a basic, primitive component of our linguistic practice – as shown, for instance, by the fact that it cannot be explained in terms of *interpretation*.

The first idea has been the focus of our discussion so far. Let us focus for a moment on the second idea. Just after rejecting the rules-as-rails picture of rule-following, Wittgenstein remarks that, “When I obey a rule, I do not choose. I obey the rule *blindly*” (*PI*, 219).

“Following a rule blindly” means that in basic cases of rule-following there is no place to look for directions about how to follow the rule.

In the end, rule-following is like an act of decision because our action when we follow a rule “is free from logical determination by anything external to it” (Long, 2010; p.86).

There are no instructions that tell us what to do because any pattern can be continued in an indefinite number of ways and any formulation of the rule can be interpreted in many different ways. As is true for interpretations, justification must also come to an end at a certain point.

There is a level where “our moves are uninformed by – are not the rational output of – any appreciation of *facts about what the rules require*” (Wright, 2007; p.498). In the case of blind rule-following, we “do not really follow – are not really guided by – anything” (Wright, 2007; p.497). As Wittgenstein put it:

“How can he know how he is to continue a pattern by himself – whatever instruction you give him? – Well, how do I know? – If that means ‘Have I reasons?’ the answer is: my reasons will soon give out. And then I shall act, without reasons” (*PI*, 211).

But, as Wittgenstein reminds us, the lack of reason is not an obstacle for action: “act quickly, with perfect certainty, and the lack of reasons does not trouble me” (*PI*, 212). Moreover, “To use the word without a justification does not mean to use it wrongfully” (*RFM*, VII, §40).

This means that primitive, basic rule-following might be without reason, but it is not an irrational, arbitrary act. It is an act that can be evaluated in terms of correctness or incorrectness. In particular, as Wittgenstein explicitly acknowledges, “to think one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule” (*PI*, 202).

Furthermore, “If everything can be made out to accord with the rule, then it can also be made out to conflict with it. And so there would be neither accord nor conflict here” (*PI*, 201).

There is still need for a criterion to establish in which cases it is justified to judge somebody as following the rule or going against it.



A third idea of Wittgenstein emerges as a response to this question. His suggestion is that what warrants the judgment that I am following rule A rather than rule B is simply my following rule A.

Of course, the ability of others to see that rule in my actions depends on their sharing the right sort of natural/cultural history with me (cf. Long, 2010; p.87).

Rule-following is a “practice” (*PI*, 202), which is essentially based on habits and “customs”. Referring in general to the rules of harmony, Wittgenstein is reported to have said that, “the rules of harmony [...] expressed the way people wanted chords to follow [...]. All the greatest composers wrote in accordance with them” (*LC*, I, p.16).

A similar resorting to habits and customs holds true in the jazz world and in the practice of improvisation.

## 2.1 The jazzy version

Jazz improvisation has a social dimension. It not only requires a mastery of the musical instrument, the acquisition of a particular sensibility to musical possibilities, and eventually the learning of complex musical knowledge. It also requires that a musician learn how to interact with the other players of the group: she has to learn the social protocols of rule improvisation.

“Protocols” is a term used by Philip Alperson to refer to “forms of ceremony that guide musical routine and expectations”. One does not find these protocols in handbooks, but, as Alperson claims, “people who drink in the culture of jazz learn what these conventions are”.<sup>15</sup>

Actually, playing together is much more than parallel playing. In a typical case of a solo, the player improvises within the performance of a standard, whose theme is firstly presented and then made the basis for solo passages.

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<sup>15</sup> Alperson, 2010; p.277. The internalization of values considered relevant by the participants to the practice, or by those who “inhabit” the jazz world (musicians, critics, producers, the audience, etc.), is also important. Those values are not only aesthetical values. The need for an individual voice often corresponds to a somehow ethical need to be oneself or to be true to oneself (cf. Duranti and Burrell, 2004). At the same time, the idea of working together – of enhancing what the other musician plays – and the sense of respecting others and of mutual cooperation are also central values of jazz. As Alperson claims, “the dynamics of the jazz world have both a musical and a social significance” (Alperson, 2010; p.278).

Usually, the soloist not only reacts to what she has previously played, but also interacts with what other members of the group play. Accompanists are not a mere background; they might also offer musical ideas or inspiration to the soloist and they somehow co-operate to develop those ideas.<sup>16</sup>

The spontaneous creation of music is therefore tied together with the spontaneous creation of structures of interaction that keep the “conversation” going.<sup>17</sup>

We have used the term “conversation” because jazz musicians often describe improvisation as a form of conversation or dialogue, and, disputable as this might be, they describe their genre as a language.<sup>18</sup>

This is an intriguing point we can only hint at in this paper.<sup>19</sup> A particular aspect of the dialogical paradigm, to which Robert Kraut has drawn attention, interests us here.

It concerns the knowledge possessed by language users of what counts as an “apt” or “inappropriate” linguistic performance. To speak and understand a language consists partly in “grasping” the rules of correct usage; namely, as Kraut explains, “the circumstances under which particular utterances are warranted”. He then notices that, as language is related to assertability conditions, there is also such a thing “as an ‘apt’ or ‘inappropriate’ musical phrase, relative to the genre and the context in which it is formulated”.

This means that to understand how to play or how to go on in an improvisation is to know, *inter alia*, “the circumstances under which a particular musical phrase [...] is warranted” (Kraut, 2007; p.62).

The knowledge in question involves a certain amount of “theoretical” knowledge or knowing-*that*.

Students with the required tonal sensitivities and other discriminative and expressive skills may learn the rules of the genre.<sup>20</sup> But there is more

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Schweikard, 2014; pp.67-73 and Berliner, 1994; chap. 13. According to Derek Bailey, “some of the greatest opportunities provided by free improvisation are in the exploration of relationships between players” (Bailey, 1992; p.105).

<sup>17</sup> Schweikard, 2014; p.77. Things and roles are obviously still more complex in joint and group improvisation.

<sup>18</sup> It is not by chance that, as Alperson notes, some of the protocols that guide improvisation have a conversational aspect in the sense that they are analogous “to some of the habits of decorum that surround linguistic conversation” (Alperson, 2010; p.277). Some sceptical doubts about the “conversational” imagery widespread in the jazz world are recalled by Kraut, 2007; pp.57-65, who nevertheless claims that “jazz matters to aesthetic theory by foregrounding the need to take seriously the dialogical, art-as-language paradigm” (ivi, p.65).

<sup>19</sup> For some interesting suggestions on the topic cf. Feige, 2014; pp.38-42.

than just this involved in knowing whether in a certain context a particular musical phrase is “warranted”.

We think that Wittgenstein’s remarks on the role of practices in rule-following offer an important clue here. He suggests that it is only thanks to this kind of regularity that a practice exhibits that we have a criterion to classify some moves as complying with the rule and others as going against it.

“Is what we call ‘obeying a rule’ something that it would be possible for only *one* man to do, and only *once* in his life? [...] It is not possible [...] To obey a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are *customs* (uses, institutions)”.

“To understand a sentence means to understand a language. To understand a language means to be master of a technique” (*PI*, 199).

In saying that rule-following involves a mastery of a technique, Wittgenstein is stressing that applying a rule correctly is first and foremost a form of knowing-*how*: we know *that* such and such a move is the correct one because we know *how* to continue a series.<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, this is only possible because some habit was formed as a result of extensive training, based on “examples” and “exercise” (*PI*, 208). Paragraph 208 of *Philosophical Investigations* illustrates how a pupil learns a technique under the guidance of a teacher who first shows him some applications of the technique and then “influence[s] him by expressions of agreement, rejection, expectation, encouragement [...] let[s] him go his way, or hold him back; and so on”.

We learn to react in a certain way to a given situation. Wittgenstein himself connects this learning process to the appreciation of some basic rhythmical patterns:

“The words ‘language’, ‘proposition’, ‘order’, ‘rule’, ‘calculation’, ‘experiment’, ‘following a rule’ relate to a technique, a custom.”

“A preliminary step towards acting according to a rule would be, say, pleasure in simple regularities such as the tapping out of simple rhythms [...]” (*RFM* VI, §43).

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Alperson, 2010; pp.274-277 for a list of the skills involved in improvisation.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Wright, 2007; p.498: “In basic cases there is no [...] rationalising knowledge enabling the competence.”

Example and exercise are by no means accidental components of language acquisition. Wittgenstein, rather, sees them as essential ingredients of the *practice* of rule-following.

Rules by themselves are not enough: “Not only rules, but also examples are needed for establishing a practice. Our rules leave loop-holes open, and the practice has to speak for itself” (*OC*, 139).

What Wittgenstein says about language holds for jazz too. Through hard training musicians may acquire the (practical) knowledge implied in going on to play correctly and expressively in improvisation.

Just as linguistic communication, improvisation is also rooted in a “social” setting. Both in jazz and in language usage, rule-following is made possible by the existence of social practices. One of Wittgenstein’s favorite examples is chess. It is worth quoting from one of his remarks on the topic in the following exchange between two “voices”:

“Where is the connexion effected between the sense of the expression ‘Let’s play a game of chess’ and all the rules of the game? – Well, in the list of rules of the game, in the teaching of it, in the day-to-day practice of playing” (*PI*, 197).

We could imagine a group of players who intend to perform a standard – say “Body and Soul” – and improvise on it, and thus we could substitute the words “Let’s play a game of chess” in the above passage with “Let’s play a standard”.

Wittgenstein’s point might apply also in this case: what connects rule and action, besides the purely causal relation of training people to go on in a certain way, is the existence of customs or practices (cf. Schulte, 2007; pp.473-475).

Also, in jazz, following a rule is a social practice; it is part of the scaffolding of the form of life of jazz playing, of making music in the moment, and when we look at that practice, we see that there is something considered as the correct or appropriate way to play and to go on playing.

The rules in question are of various kinds. A nice example, with regard to costumes labelled “conversational protocols”, might be the gesture at the beginning of Miles Davis’s and Duke Jordan’s solos in a performance of Charlie Parker’s blues “Bird Feather”, recorded on November 4, 1947.

William Day makes us notice that the two soloists each “take part in the not uncommon practice of beginning their solo with a delightfully subtle reworking of the last notes of the preceding solo – Davis of Parker’s ending and Jordan of Davis’s ending” (Day, 2010; p.295).

Among other effects, this gesture, Day comments, creates the impression “that the previous solo has not ended, or at least that its driving idea has not, as if the aim of this playing or music making is to play on”.

This should presumably be interpreted in light of the absence of an ending in the practice of jazz soloing. According to Day, jazz improvisers’ aversion to an ending that sounds like an end might be seen as “a gesture of invitation to the other performers”, whose sense, at least in a prominent line of the tradition of jazz, is that of continuing a conversation, “the end of which is always to discover whether you and I share a world” (Day, 2010; p.296).

To share a world is always to share practices and rules, and although innovation and unpredictability are highly praised in the jazz world, it is only due to customs and rules that what improvisers play is not a mere scribble without form and aim. As Wittgenstein observes, there is also the case “where we play and – make up the rules as we go along”; and there is even the case “where we alter them – as we go along” (*PI*, 83).<sup>22</sup>

We may also invent new “musical” games; however, this is possible only because we have already played such kinds of games (cf. *PI*, 204).

### 3. A Wittgensteinian coda

The distinction between the grasping and interpreting of a rule, which we focused on in the first section of this paper, has brought to light at least two aspects of Wittgenstein’s remarks that are also relevant for jazz improvisation.

One is the spontaneous character of grasping and following a rule: grasping a rule implies something like arriving at a basic level of comprehension.

The other is the importance of practices. As we have seen in the second section of the paper, following a rule is a certain kind of social practice.

In pursuing this theme, Wittgenstein tries to disentangle us from the misunderstanding contained in the assumption that in order to make sense of rule-governed activities we have to analyze them in terms of something more basic (Long, 2010; p.84).

Rather, he suggests that in order to see what it means to follow a rule in an appropriate way, we have to look at the practices of a shared form of life (cf. Lofti 106). That these practices cannot, in turn, be identified “independently of a reference to following *that rule*” (Long, 2010; p.84) might give the impression that we have fallen in a circle.

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<sup>22</sup> For a comment cf. Schulte 2014, pp.137-138.

However, the point is precisely that we do not need to dig beneath our ordinary experience or look for something external to rule-following in order to find a foundation for it since the only factor able to determine which rule one is following is precisely that (s)he is following *that* particular rule (cf. Long, 2010; p.84).

Rule-following is basic, and it has a social character. To conclude, we would like to say something more on this.

The social character of rule-following naturally emerges when we realize that the kind of customs that make rule-following possible are *social* customs. The *locus classicus* for this theme is the already cited paragraph 202 of the *Philosophical Investigation*. It is worth citing it in full:

“And hence also ‘obeying a rule’ is a practice. And to think one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule. Hence it is not possible to obey a rule ‘privately’: otherwise thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same thing as obeying it.”

Why should private rule-following collapse the distinction between following the rule and believing to be following it?

In order to appreciate this, we should remind ourselves of our first Wittgensteinian “variation”.

There we said that, properly speaking, in basic rule-following we “do not really follow – are not really guided by – anything” (Wright, 2007; p.497). We abandoned the idea that the meanings of the words used to formulate the rule are capable of determining the requirements of the rule in particular cases independently of our recognition of a certain move as the correct application of the rule to the given case.

This means that neither the bare formulation of a rule nor its past uses can by themselves provide the standard to determine the requirements of a rule in particular cases. But, for a private rule-follower, the only alternative standard to establish what counts as a correct application of the rule is bound to be his impression, or rather his decision, that some move is the correct one.

For a private rule-follower, the right result is bound to be what *strikes him* as the right result: “One would like to say: whatever is going to seem right to me is right. And that only means that here we can't talk about ‘right’” (*PI*, 258).

The objectivity of rule-following would be lost if it were not for the existence of a community of rule-followers who (a) all get the same result when applying the rule to particular cases, and (b) acknowledge such an

agreement in rule-following and agree on considering the common result as the correct one.<sup>23</sup>

It is precisely the existence of such a community that provides the standard against which the performance of an individual can be judged as a correct/incorrect application of the rule.

“...the phenomenon of language is based on regularity, on agreement in action. Here it is of the greatest importance that all or the enormous majority of us agree in certain things. I can, e.g., be quite sure that the colour of this object will be called ‘green’ by far the most of the human beings who see it. [...] It is essential for communication that we agree in a large number of judgements” (*RFM*, V, §39).

“Disputes do not break out (among mathematicians, say) over the question whether a rule has been obeyed or not. People don’t come to blows over it, for example. This is part of the framework on which the working of the language is based [...]” (*PI*, 202).

“Could there be only one human being that calculated? Could there be only one that followed a rule? Are these questions like, say, this one: ‘Can one man alone engage in commerce?’” (*RFM*, VI, §45).

What these passages suggest is that standards “tend to go together with our practices, entrenched forms of behaviour and customs of long standing” (Schulte, 2007; p.476).

According to Wittgenstein, the requirements of a rule in particular situations are not constituted independently of the social practice of following that rule. Still, Wittgenstein’s rejection of the pictures of rule-as-rails is compatible with the recognition that such a description “made sense if it was to be understood *symbolically*. – I should have said: This is how it strikes me” (*PI*, 219).<sup>24</sup>

In other words, it is an important part of some of our practices that in following a rule we perceive a certain way of going on as the only possible way.

Even though the super-rigidity of rules (*LFM*, p.199) is largely mythological (*PI*, 221), the rules normally strike us as something rigid: call this fact “the felt-rigidity of rules”. It might be thought that, at least in this respect, there is an important gap between rule-following and

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<sup>23</sup> See: Frascolla, 1994; pp.123-124 on these two aspects of the behavior of a community of rule-followers.

<sup>24</sup> See also: *PI*, 230: “‘The line intimates to me the way I am to go.’ – But that is of course only a picture.”

improvisation. And, surely, Wittgenstein himself stressed that in the basic case of following a rule there seems to be no room for anything like “inspiration”. Calculating, he seems to suggest, is different from composing:

“What is the difference between this process of obeying a kind of inspiration and that of obeying a rule? For they are surely not the same. In the case of inspiration I await direction” (*PI*, 232).

“It would also be possible to imagine such a training in a sort of arithmetic. Children could calculate, each in his own way – as long as they listened to their inner voice and obeyed it. Calculating in this way would be like a sort of composing” (*PI*, 233).

The acknowledgement of the felt-rigidity of rules is still compatible with Wittgenstein’s insistence on an apparently opposite theme, i.e., that of the plasticity of rules. Wittgenstein acknowledges that precise rules might not always be present in our language games, nor are they always needed:

“...the application of a word is not everywhere bounded by rules” (*PI*, 84).

“...in general we don’t use language according to strict rules – it hasn’t been taught us by means of strict rules either” (*LB*, p.25).

“Is it even always an advantage to replace an indistinct picture by a sharp one? Isn’t the indistinct one often exactly what we need?” (*PI*, 71)

In the end, both following a rule and playing and improvising on a melody are essentially open practices; they are techniques we learn to master by extensive training but which do not *force* us to act in a certain way. Beyond the reasons already reviewed, we can reach this conclusion by also recalling a passage already quoted that reminds ourselves of “the case where we play and – make up the rules as we go along [...] And there is even one where we alter them – as we go along” (*PI*, 83).

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