

Free Improvisation Information Service over the Internet

Peter Stubley
University of Sheffield

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New sites, new sounds: a functioning electronic information service on free improvisation over the Internet

*[Peter Stubley](#), Sub-Librarian,
St. George's Library, University of Sheffield,
United Kingdom*

Introduction

This paper describes a wholly electronic service with real information content that has been running over the Internet since January 1995. The particular aspects that mark this out as different from many Web sites are considered in the paper, as well as a comparison with print-based equivalents, but I will begin with a consideration of the subject focus of the service.

Free improvisation

The origins of free improvisation date back to the mid 1960s and lie in a mixture of the avant garde end of jazz – Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane, Cecil Taylor – and contemporary classical music – Schoenberg, Webern. In fact, at this time, established methods of improvising, using particular forms of approach, were being challenged in rather different ways in the US and in Europe. But even within Europe there were no (fortunately) co-ordinated stirrings, and musicians in three countries in particular – England, Holland and Germany – are acknowledged as developing new methods of playing improvised music, working broadly independently of each other (which is not to say there weren't others). In England, one centre for the early developments was, unsurprisingly, London, while the other was Sheffield, via Joseph Holbrooke, a group which developed its ideas and techniques in the city from 1963 to 1966, initially playing conventional jazz but by 1965 playing totally improvised pieces.

Joseph Holbrooke was a trio, comprising Derek Bailey, guitar, Tony Oxley, percussion, and Gavin Bryars, bass; Bryars had been a student at The University of Sheffield who had remained in the city and who, of course, is now well known as a composer. Bailey ([1](#)) outlines the way in which the three found it necessary to challenge the status quo of imposed structured improvisation, initially by combining approaches from modern jazz (via Oxley) and contemporary classical composers (Bryars) and then by developing a gradual sequence of attacks on metre and chord sequences arising as an imperative out of what had been attempted and realising there was still some way to go. As Oxley says (Bailey, p. 89), 'Sometimes there's an assumption that this sort of thing is done just to be different. That's totally wrong. It's an emotional demand that you have to meet'. Of special relevance here is Tony Oxley's remark that, "*One of the remarkable things about the Sheffield experience for me was that I felt that I suddenly wasn't involved with the jazz language but I was involved with a universal language. I feel that now.*".

Derek Bailey, Tony Oxley and Gavin Bryars left Sheffield for London in 1966. Oxley worked as the house drummer for Ronnie Scott's while maintaining his involvement

with free music and both he and Bailey played a key role in the developing London scene, Bailey among other things moving in and out of the Spontaneous Music Ensemble. Both now have international reputations in this thing called free music or free improvisation.

For newcomers to the genre it is worth pointing out that this music is **NOT** jazz; it may incorporate some jazz elements from time to time or from some practitioners but its relationship to 'swing' is as far away as a duck is from a volcano. And although this brief overview has concentrated on the scene as it began in Sheffield, many of the musicians – probably out of some kind of need for creating a self-help community – played together across Europe and, while this might not actually have changed playing styles, it did offer wider playing opportunities than those found nationally, as well as providing opportunities for exploring and appreciating different sound worlds and playing modes. At one stage it would have been moderately easy to recognise the sound of European Free Improvisation and even in 1996 it is possible (for the author at least) to define a prototypical sound of the music. However, the richness of today's music comes from the fact that the pioneers are still playing (and playing with inventiveness and originality) while at least two generations of younger players are making their own contributions, building on the previous foundations, sometimes seeming to ignore these entirely. At the same time, many non-European musicians have been inspired by the European approach and have grafted this onto their own individual and national perspectives; this has especially happened in the US. Accordingly, one might argue that we should be dealing with the 'world view' of improvisation. While this might make some kind of sense from the subject perspective, in writing about the music and – as in this instance – creating a new Web site from scratch, it is useful to have boundaries, however flexible these turn out to be.

European Free Improvisation Internet service

Since the beginning of 1995 I have been building up an electronic resource on European free improvisation, specifically making this available over the Internet. The idea, of course, is not new. One of the original (if not the original) electronic jazz sites is based at NorthWestern University where a tremendous job has been done collating all kinds of information on different styles of jazz world wide. But the emphasis there is 'jazz' and nobody appeared to have deliberately started a focus for that rather different animal, free improvisation. There was obviously an interest in this music on the net and, as far as US audiences were concerned, there was a great enthusiasm and knowledge for some practitioners but a dearth of information about others. After speaking informally to a few musicians about the possibilities of the Internet being used in this way, I finally began to seriously compile and organise information in January 1995 and in early February the **European Free Improvisation Pages (EFIP)** were born.

My intention in establishing this Web site was as a direct contrast to much so-called 'information' accessible over the net. This is beginning to change, but the focus of so many sites is direct marketing for products that can be bought on- or off-line, or alternatively simple lists of 'interesting' sites, and few appear to offer objective information in the way that it exists in reference books in the library. The aim was to gradually build up a comprehensive resource on European free improvisation, though not applying the term too strictly, and so at times the content veers into the free jazz

arena, incorporates musicians at ease with composition and improvisation and covers musicians tending towards more industrial and ambient areas.

Like the contents page of a book, the 'Home Page' lays out the scope of the resource, indicating separate sections on: individual musicians and groups (available via a Musicians' and Group Index); Independent record labels; Distributors and retailers of the music across the world; a Bibliography of books and magazines; a list of Upcoming concerts arranged by musician and location; a section on Organisations; and a list of links to related sites. The intention is that from this 'broad brush' introduction of the Home Page, users can delve deeper moving, for example, from the list of Independent Record Labels with its presentation of outline coverage and addresses, to a list of recordings, finally choosing a particular item and viewing a colour scanned image of its cover together with full track listings. Like all World Wide Web documents, hypertext links make it possible to jump easily to related information, moving from say, the page on Peter Brötzmann to photographs taken at a recent festival, to a particular recording, to a list of FMP CDs and then to quite a different record label, all without returning to the Home Page (see illustration 1). The depth of the resource can be judged by the fact that, at May 1995, there are details on around 50 musicians, 28 independent record labels (most with full discographical details and scanned images of LP/CD covers), and around 300 recordings.

Illustration 1.

Audio clips

But from this starting point, the resource has been expanded further. After the first six months of operation it was extended by incorporating audio clips of 1 minute in length – limited so as to reduce download time (each clip is around 1.3 Mbytes in size) while still providing something useful. The first samples were taken from new releases from the Incus and Emanem labels but these have since been joined by others. Interestingly, one record label who indicated that they would prefer not to have clips used from their releases has now changed its mind and is happy to be

included in this way. Of course, the artistic or aesthetic validity of incorporating 60 seconds of a 20 minute improvisation is questionable, yet in practice the clips do provide an idea of the sound of this 'different' type of music and in this way could broaden its appreciation. There are currently 22 audio clips available for downloading.

Video clips

The most recent expansion of resources has been into video clips. These had not been at the top of my agenda when establishing the Web site for I was aware of only one videotape – and that (semi) commercially available – that fell within the subject ambit. But as contact has been made with a growing number of musicians, so the existence of video has been discovered (some shot privately) and, moreover, one of the prime independent record companies (Incus, run by Derek Bailey) has coincidentally decided to branch out into releasing video recordings of performances. Thus, the content is there to be added.

The key disadvantage of video lies partly in the digitising process itself – though this can be mastered with relative ease (hardware permitting) – but mainly in the high overhead required for disk storage space and the consequent long download times for even short sequences. Audio clips present related problems but comprising only a single channel (sound) are relatively easy to handle, once the decision has been taken not to compromise on audio quality, otherwise the whole point of the clips is lost (particularly with music that to some ears doesn't sound like music!). In digitising the video sequences, the decision was taken (again) not to compromise audio quality, but different compression algorithms have markedly different effects on the video quality and these can change colour fidelity, synchronisation with audio, and overall utility of the clip. But compression is necessary to provide any semblance of usefulness for video clips over the Internet. To give an example, one solo from a musician which obviously represents a section from a much larger work is around 1 minute 30 seconds in length. Compressing this with care from the original analogue video provides a QuickTime video of small display area occupying 68 Mbytes of disc space. This can be further compressed in software to around 50 Mbytes providing a still acceptable end product but at a size which is totally unusable across the Internet. Even making a selection from the original 1 minute 30 seconds to create a smaller 'musically acceptable' segment ends up with a clip of 43 seconds and 25 Mbytes. The movement that occurs within a video sequence also effects the ultimate size of the clip so that not all 43 second segments are 25 Mbytes in size; in fact another 40 second sequence occupies only 4 Mbytes.

The outcome is that most of the video clips added to the Web site are short in length to give end users some possibility of downloading. At the time of writing, 6 video clips are available though a further 100 MB of sequences have been prepared but not yet loaded, partly because it is proving difficult to reduce these to acceptable sizes. But interestingly, to take up the point at the beginning of this discussion on video, there is no shortage of sequences. And some musicians who have seen them have felt that they are more successful than the audio clips. Of course, all audio and video sequences have been included with the full knowledge and permission of the copyright holders. The first video sequence was included from an Arts Council of England video and permission was received for this with reasonable ease. One should

remember that the sequences are extremely short when compared with normal video run times.

Full text

One other addition has been the incorporation of full text. Of course, full text is an essential part of the resource in the biographies of the musicians but there are now two full text articles included as well. One of these is an interview of an English musician, Evan Parker, which originally appeared in French in the French magazine *Improjazz*. However, a 'net' colleague, Patrice Roussel, who maintains an online discography of Evan Parker, transcribed the interview and offered it for mounting on my site. Links have been made from various places within the interview to my Web resources (e.g. to specific records or to particular musicians) and this has been mounted with the knowledge of the editor of *Improjazz*. The other full text is a paper written by Christian Munthe, a free improvising guitarist who works at Stockholm University, and entitled 'What is free improvisation?'. This had originally appeared in Swedish in a Swedish journal, *Nutida Musik*, but was translated for an Internet discussion group and then mounted at my request. It is hoped that similar papers and interviews can be mounted in the future.

Access to the site

The full resource occupies around 120 MB of disc space, one third of which represents compressed, digitised video. It is mounted on a server at The University of Sheffield from where it is available, free of charge to anyone in the world, 24 hours a day. The url is:

<http://www.shef.ac.uk/misc/rec/ps/efi/index.html>

Responses to the information service

A basic counter is linked to each of the major pages (Independent Record Labels; Upcoming concerts; etc.) and to the musicians' pages, and shows that accesses to the Home Page have been running, on average, at 34 per day during 1996 (4170 accesses from 1 January to 30 April). This is not especially large in Internet terms, when one considers the counters on popular (populist?) sites, but it is certainly respectable bearing in mind the specialist nature of this music. The most popular musician is Derek Bailey with over 1200 accesses to his main page since November 1995 (when the current counter was activated) and 800 accesses to his complete discography.

From the perspective of the access counter, I consider this to be a successful service, but other responses have been equally encouraging and gratifying, most particularly from the 'improvising community' as a whole. Substantial help has been received from musicians and record companies right across Europe, I have been invited to submit articles in improvising magazines and I have even been interviewed about the work for the French magazine *Revue & corrigée* (March 1996). Numerous e-mail messages have been received expressing enthusiasm when people have used the service (e.g. the list of distributors for locating outlets for new labels) and I have also been seen as a focus – by some – for queries about concerts and musicians: do I know if Derek Bailey gives guitar lessons; do I know the full schedule of the group AMM's visit to the US; is there any chance that we could open for Evan Parker on a US tour;

etc. And the record companies themselves have received direct requests (some snail mail; some e-mail) as a result of the resource. In a recent copy of the French *Jazz magazine* (2) reviewing Internet jazz resources, there were two mentions of this Web site:

- On peut découvrir le catalogue de certains labels indépendants français (nato, in situ...) sur des serveurs à vocation fédératrice tels European Free Improvisation, à forte dominante britannique mais en enrichissement constant. D'autres, qui ont depuis longtemps perdu l'auréole des labels indépendants – ECM, Atlantic, Verve, Blue Note, RCA-Victor – y sont, mais sans grande originalité.
- Même si l'adresse Web n'est pas des plus simples à mémoriser, quelques secondes suffisent pour accéder immédiatement à une mine d'informations. Vous n'ignorez plus rien de l'agenda 96 (fort rempli) d'Evan Parker, vous pourrez visionner un extrait d'une vidéo de Derek Bailey...

Finally, a number of users have mentioned the way in which the site has been organised and the ease with which it is possible to find information. Hopefully, this is a result of the direct application of librarianship principles.

Comparison between electronic and paper resources

Though this site was started as a personal initiative, to see if such a thing were possible within this rather restricted subject area, it is possible as a result, to make a number of comparisons between electronic and paper resources. Probably the most important characteristic of this type of electronic publication is the ability to update as time and resources become available. To be able to achieve this, the Web site must create sufficient interest at an early stage so that existing users are encouraged to return and new ones seek it out. It can then build up from a successful baseline and become a regularly expanding resource, in comparison to the printed book which is set in stone until the next edition or update. This is particularly important in an area of music which is undergoing constant change and addition through the release of new recordings and the appearance of new musicians. How often have we all purchased discographies or books or music criticism, only to find that the recording we are interested in has been missed by the publication cut-off date. It is also easy to respond in an electronic environment to users' needs. I have received several requests for certain musicians or labels to be included and though much of the time I was aware of these, it has actually changed the emphasis I have given to updating, changing priorities to meet these requests. At the same time, it may be thought that as this resource has arisen out of one person's enthusiasm, it represents an amateur view of the subject, lacking depth and so having little lasting value. And, moreover, it must be a poor relation to printed equivalents. Some of this is true. The biographies have been largely prepared by me from information submitted by musicians and so there could be said to be a certain element of bias here (though I do try to keep an objective perspective and remove essentially sycophantic comments). But I have deliberately sought information from musicians who are not well represented in the printed literature (sometimes not at all) and certain elements of the electronic resource are not represented at all in paper. The one obvious section is the set of pages on Upcoming concerts. It is not comprehensive (it does not aim to be) but it contains an English language overview of particular European musicians which is not available anywhere

else. In fact, after 18 months, there is no equivalent paper resource to the European Free Improvisation Pages. Which is not to denigrate in any way the paper sources; just to point out that this has become a unique resource which complements its paper counterparts.

Though, as pointed out earlier, librarianship principles have been used to organise the information, the facilities of Web browsers – and hypertext in particular – enable a different approach to be taken, both to the organisation and use of the material. One way of viewing this electronic resource is as a ‘modular discography’. Each recording – whether LP or CD – is allocated its own page which incorporates a scanned image of the cover and full personnel and track listings (illustration 2).

Illustration 2.

From here, using hypertext links it is possible to move to a listing of the rest of the catalogue of this particular label, or to the biographical information on one of the participating musicians and then explore that person's discography. In this way only one electronic record of a recording is required for all purposes within the resource, this record being linked to all appropriate places, event to external sites.

Finally, this is very much a cooperative venture. The assistance and support from musicians and records labels has already been mentioned, and many of these have maintained regular contact to permit easy updating of information: new record releases; new concert information; new material for the biographical pages. A colleague based at the University of Stuttgart mails me listings of concerts in Germany on a monthly basis, and the compiler of Derek Bailey's discography, Richard Shapiro from Boston (US), has mounted his online discography on this site, with links to all the relevant recordings.

The effort in building the resource or that in maintaining it has not been mentioned in this paper. Suffice to say it is substantial but that I am still committed to enhancing and maintaining this as a free access site. Economic forces could change this in time. However, the Arts Council of England (3) have recently published a discussion document on new music – an area that broadly covers improvisation – and the possibilities for using the Internet are mentioned. Linking to such a discussion may be one way of continuing the European Free Improvisation Pages into the distant future.

References

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