

Unsilent Night

Composed by Phil Kline

A Cryptic Music presentation

Between Alexandra Park and Robson Square on Saturday, December 14, 2002

By Alexander Varty

Art is endlessly specific – any one painting, poem, or piece of music can mean a million different things – and thus it's dangerous to make generalizations about its nature. I'm going to stick my neck out, though, and say that most contemporary artistic endeavours fall roughly into one of two camps: the path of beauty or the path of transgression. One seeks to celebrate the divine or the numinous, with the aim of uplifting the spirit; the other seeks to shock or unsettle, with the aim of loosing the psyche from its fixed foundations so that new revelations may be attained. The two are certainly not mutually exclusive: beauty can have a profoundly transformative effect, and transgressive acts can be deeply spiritual. But works of art in which the two combine are rare, which is why it was a particular pleasure to take part in the creation of one in the form of Phil Kline's *Unsilent Night*.

The idea behind the New York composer's new-music caroling party is brilliantly simple: write an hour-long electronic score; record each of its components on a separate cassette tape; divide those tapes between a variable number of boom box-toting participants; and then play the tapes while walking through the city. In Manhattan, Kline's been staging his work every year for a decade, and performances now regularly attract hundreds of revelers; Cryptic Music's Colin MacDonald decided to stage *Unsilent Night's* Vancouver debut in 2001, and continued with a second installment last Saturday. Given that the number of local participants doubled between last year and this, despite the inclement weather, the event may well go on to become something of a seasonal tradition – and deservedly so.

The most exciting aspect of Kline's piece is its mildly transgressive nature: art is generally hidden away in galleries and concert halls and theatres, but *Unsilent Night* brings it into the streets in a noisy and public fashion. It also blurs the line between audience and performer, at least for those who elect to join in as boom-box bearers, allowing them to reconnect with a tradition of festive processions that is more usually limited to religious groups: Hare Krishnas, Roman Catholics, and the like. And in this particular performance, which started at the beach-side bandstand in Alexandra Park and ended at the skating rink in Robson Square, it was also a way of bringing a brief burst of uncommercial fun into the city's busiest shopping district.

In addition to all that, the music is undeniably lovely. From electronic drones, bells, and sampled choral singing, Kline has wrought a piece that evokes the

Christmas season without ever sounding tawdry or overfamiliar; played on 30 boom boxes in motion, *Unsilent Night* offers extra layers of sensory pleasure. On Saturday, it sounded different depending on where you were in the group, or where you stood outside of it; different, too, depending on the physical surroundings. Crossing the West End's Nelson Park, it sounded spacey and ethereal; reflecting from the glass storefronts of Robson Street, it took on a more celebratory – and confrontation – tone. The music shifted shape as participants moved back and forth in the parade, but the overall effect was something like a cloud of sound moving low to the ground and lit from within by a thousand flickering lights.

The most curious aspect of the whole performance, though, was the blank indifference *Unsilent Night* met with from many Robson Street shoppers. I joked with one fellow participant that we were misjudging these stone-faced urbanites, that they led inner lives so full of miracles and mystery that they had no need for gifts of surprise and sound, but I'm afraid I was wrong. The holiday season is serious business, and it's only a lucky few who can abandon themselves to joy – as ginning from ear to ear and soaked to the skin, we did last Saturday night.