

Unsilent Night

By Kyle Gann

Phil Kline
Essential Music

"Now's my chance to run for office," joked Phil Kline December 17, shouting to his motley volunteer orchestra gathered in front of St. Mark's Church. "I'll give you a count of one, two, three, go, and then we'll head east on 10th Street. One, two, three, go!" CLICK went the buttons on about 35 boomboxes simultaneously, and we were off toward Tompkins Square Park, a crowd that crested at about 60, more than half of us broadcasting tapes of electronic music. Some people we passed laughed, some glared, some stopped to listen in confusion turning to delight. New York being what it is, many wouldn't have paid the slightest notice if we had been buck naked with Roman candles tied to our ears. "What is this?" a young guy with a scuzzy beard accosted me. (I didn't carry a boombox, but I guess I looked involved.) "It's a piece of music," I ventured. "Sort of an avant-garde thing?" he asked. I allowed as much. He nodded grimly and passed on, as though categorizing the event relieved him from having to listen to it.

There's precious little new music for Christmas. In this century, only Brits like Holst, Walton, and Britten continued to provide some (except for Schoenberg's little-known chamber-music gem *Weihnachtsmusik*, and an orchestra piece John La Montaine once

based on "The Twelve Days of Christmas," as I recall). Consequently, the holidays always come as an interruption during which we turn back to previous eras, instead of as something new-music composers could flow with and help celebrate. As a remedy Kline—a guitarist in Glenn Branca's ensemble who's becoming known for his own innovative work with multiple tape players—began two years ago leading an annual event called *Carol*, to spread holiday cheer by leading his cassette-player carriers around the Village. The result is a marvelously fluid, traveling, spatial sound sculpture that disintegrates and reforms at nearly every spotlight.

This, I thought, must be what experimental music felt like in the '60s, just going out to do anything wild, and watching people's reactions. (Prosewise, I hear myself turning into Tom Johnson at such moments.) Accordingly, I figured that the tapes would contain some wacky array of attention-getting noises. This is where Kline far surpassed my expectations. Moments after the big click, a sensuous dominant seventh chord for string orchestra floated slowly down, a silken mantle enveloping 10th Street in a gentle, contented mood. As we neared the park, the strings gave way to soft booms that echoed nicely among the tape players, but may have been too quiet to attract attention. These were followed by smooth ethnic chanting, to which a panhandler

on a corner danced an incongruous jig. Minimalist repeating patterns in bittersweet minor scales began flowing from box to box. Kline would later complain that the boxes didn't stay sufficiently in synch, yet there was an effect amazing to hear when chords repeating at different tempos slowly drew into phase on a single beat and then spread out again. I couldn't imagine a music more perfect, more inspired, for this performance setup.

We came back along St. Marks and turned south on Lafayette, playing scales in chimes in front of the Public Theater. Along Great Jones we got a wonderful stereo effect by splitting up on opposite sides of the street, and while I dodged taxis in the middle, people stuck their heads out of apartment windows to hear loud plinking scales. After 45 minutes Kline paused, and as the tapes ran out the boomboxes clicked off in rapid, popcornlike succession. This was too short. The piece spread a lovely, mysterious, holiday aura wherever we went, as though we were Bing Crosby singing "White Christmas" purified and magnified to be heard at microscopic level, with the individual sound waves lined up in geometric arrays, yet each exuding its own warm spirit. It deserved to go on for three hours, to traverse the entire Village, to be accompanied by the most picturesque light snowfall, and to be repeated every night for a week. Next year, someone should pour some money into Kline's venture and encourage it as a Downtown tradition that could give new music a good name.

Essential Music's musicians and nonmusicians had equally as



Let's make this a holiday tradition.

much fun December 8 at Washington Square Church finishing off their three-year cycle of Cornelius Cardew's Maoist conceptual cycle *The Great Learning*. Seventeen performers played out actions with self-explanatory titles like "Crash Bang Clank Music," "Plink," and so forth, interspersed with a Confucius text about bringing the empire into equilibrium through individual self-discipline. Frankly, it looked like a village idiots' convention. Some started by wiggling their fingers like horns on top of their heads, then jumping around on their heels with their hands on their necks. Jerome Kitzke whistled like a bird and set fire to a plant. People took turns howling, while others beat a cacophony of pots and pans. Charles Wood played a mechanical whale through a megaphone. People

bowed mandolins, pan lids, and the church fan. Meanwhile, two sopranos in opposite corners of the space sang long texts with imperturbable calm.

Well, that was the '60s. Cardew wrote *The Great Learning* between 1968 and '71 in an anti-elitist attempt to get nonmusicians involved in music. Authenticity was assured by the inclusion of British composer Michael Parsons, one of the original Scratch Orchestra members. For all its insanity the performance had a Whitman-esque serenity, and actually came to resemble at certain points the blaring heterophony that opens some Tibetan religious ceremonies. Had the improvisers of the '80s heard this music, they would have realized what a feeble reflection of the '60s their frantic brand of chaos represented. ■

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