



‘Unsilent Night’ spreads music through Hayes Valley

By [Joshua Kosman](#)

Photo: Franchon Smith

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The crowd of holiday revelers was tromping along Octavia Boulevard on Saturday evening, filling the growing dusk with music, and the young woman standing on the corner was perplexed. “Are they *caroling*?” she asked her companion.

Well, yes, in a way.

The event that captivated and puzzled many of the onlookers around [Civic Center](#) and Hayes Valley was “Unsilent Night,” a sort of public sound sculpture created by the New York composer [Phil Kline](#) that unfolds every Christmas in cities around the world. It’s an open-armed participatory ritual, sending walkers with boom boxes and MP3 players into the city streets to spread music and holiday cheer.

It works, too. Perhaps the most striking aspect of Saturday’s event, sponsored locally by the [San Francisco Contemporary Music Players](#), was the benign sense of wonder it instilled in observers.

As the crowd of marchers, some 200 strong, made its way from City Hall in an wide loop through Hayes Valley and the Civic Center neighborhood, people stopped to listen and grin. Restaurant servers and bartenders came to the doors of their establishments to watch. A few lucky, footloose souls with no other pressing engagements joined in the parade.

That come-one-come-all esthetic is at the heart of “Unsilent Night,” which has grown into an annual international tradition since its origins in New York in 1992. Kline’s 45-minute opus consists of four prerecorded tracks that are designed to be loosely compatible across various spans of space.

Each participant selects one of them, and plays it through the technological medium of their choice. In its early days, “Unsilent Night” was heard exclusively through boom boxes on copied cassette tapes, and those were still prominently on view on Saturday. More recently, smart phone apps and MP3 players (some using standard hardware, some invented for the occasion) have proliferated.

The music is clangorous, immersive and sculptural — just the thing for a work that is constantly shifting in space. To walk with Saturday’s participants was to experience the music in a variety of sonic textures and theatrical modes.

Stand in the middle of a large group of people — perhaps waiting for the light to change on Van Ness Avenue — and the bells would coalesce into a densely resonant fog of sound. Walk down a sparsely populated block as the parade became attenuated, and you might catch only a whisper of music rolling up on you from behind, like the echo of someone else’s party.

The glow-stick necklaces and bracelets that the organizers issued to keep walkers together only contributed to the festive atmosphere, and even the reds and greens of the traffic lights suddenly seemed to have Christmas on their mind. And when the paraders turned into Fulton Grove, past the shingled townhouses that line the alley between Grove and Fulton streets, you could feel most keenly that an old holiday tradition had been renewed for a modern urban setting.

Because if a group of people bringing music through the streets in late December isn’t caroling, I honestly don’t what else you would call it.

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