

Sitting in concentric circles around a group of kimono-clad musicians, the crowd gathered at St. Mark's Church Monday night was far removed from the holiday shopping frenzy consuming most of the city.

Instead of the hum and din of ringing registers, about 500 people in the East Village church were enveloped in the high, soft notes of 14 *shakuhachis* — Japanese bamboo flutes — being played in unison at 8:56 p.m., the instant of the beginning of winter.

For James Nyoraku Schlefer, who composed the half-hour piece "Winter Music" especially for the winter solstice, the concert is a way of celebrating the season without attaching it to a particular organized religion.

"It's important for people who are not affiliated with a particular religion to feel part of a larger group or event at this time," said Schlefer. "It's a good opportunity to not worship as such, but to have a certain kind of reverence for a seasonal celestial event."

Shakuhachi music, originated more than a thousand years ago by Zen Buddhist monks in Japan, is supposed to be played alone, as a form of meditation.

But in a group, with musicians standing in the central pit of the church and up in its balcony, the ethereal reedy notes of the large knobby flutes seemed to create a suitable atmosphere for mass meditation.

As the piece progressed, suggesting wind blowing through reeds or birds waking in the morning after the longest night in the year, several members in the audience closed their eyes and smiled beatifically. One man sketched the musicians in airy line drawings.

Elisa de la Roche spent much of the concert swaying to and fro, eyes closed, with her 2-year-old daughter Yuri on her lap.

"To me, these are the sounds of nature, a way to get into something more spiritual," said de la Roche, who lives in lower Manhattan.

"I've been to Japan twice, and my daughter's Japanese, so for us it's a good way to hail the new season."

Although this annual concert is a highlight for Schlefer and the colleagues and students who play with him, his dedication to the music is year-round.

Trained as a classical flutist, Schlefer first heard the shakuhachi in a private concert at a music professor's apartment more than two decades ago.

"After the performance, I asked one of the musicians if I could try out the instrument, since I liked it so much," said Schlefer.

"He said I should take lessons, and I have been playing ever since."

Schlefer said the fact that he is not Japanese has never been an issue for those who come to his concerts, many of whom are Japanese immigrants.

"A lot of them are not so familiar with the music, because it's not performed much," he said. "Many of them have not heard the shakuhachi live and they are excited that the tradition is practiced by someone other than their countrymen, because it makes it more universal."

Kyoko Tanizaki, who has attended two previous winter solstice concerts at St. Mark's, agreed.

"Even though the arrangement here is not precisely traditional, the spirit of the shakuhachi comes through," said the 25-year-old student.

"Sometimes you have to go far to get



BETH BIANCULLI

**WELCOME TO WINTER:** James Nyoraku Schlefer conducts "Winter Music," which he composed, at St. Mark's Church in the East Village. The piece featured Japanese bamboo flutes (below).

