

“TO VICTORY” FOR VOCAL SEXTET AND SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA BY OLENA ILNYTSKA: MYTHOPOETICS OF THE WORK

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SUMMARY. The works of the Ukrainian composer Olena Ilnytska (born in 1977) are well known not only in Ukraine, but also abroad. Her works are performed by both domestic and foreign musicians. The piece “To Victory” for vocal sextet and symphony orchestra is an example of contemporary Ukrainian symphonism, combining Western European and national traditions with techniques of contemporary musical language. In it, as in other genres, the author's mythopoetic thinking is evident. She reflects on a complex, historically established genre that has a philosophical basis in the history of world musical culture. “To Victory” is indicative both for understanding of mythopoetics of symphony music and the author's symphonic thinking, which revealed itself in the skill of large-scale thinking, combining different musical-semantical intonation models, uniting them in an integrate structure. Mythologization takes place on genre, thematic, and timbre levels.

Keywords: Olena Ilnytska's work, theme of war, symphonic work, symphony, symphonic music

Introduction

Symphony, as a higher instrumental genre, expresses eternal and complicated themes, which accompany humanity in every epoch. In the classicism era, symphony had formed as a sound model of the world, in which the authors implemented the category of world ratio. According to O. Huzhva's definition, the very diversity of the symphonic cycle parts' genre semantics,

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its unity, correspond to the worldview, which has formed on the base of dialectics as a science about development that spreads to all spheres of being². The characteristic trait of the genre is philosophical generalization. By M. Kopytsia's definition, symphony collision lays in controversial interaction of the image-thought and its objection. As the researcher argues, such a dilemma is a philosophical and problematic rod of the symphonic piece's dramaturgy³.

As a sound model of the worldview, symphonic music is a spokesman of contemporary picture of being. Ukrainian composers' symphonic works appear in optics of life and death, spirituality and emptiness, historical events, etc. They gain new forms and sounds in the context of the time. Every Ukrainian composer has written music about the Russian-Ukrainian war. Such are O. Bezborodko's "Unbroken Symphony" (2024), D. Malyi's Symphony (2024), V. Polova's "Bucha. Lacrimosa" (2023), O. Skrypnyk's "Halyna" for violin and symphony orchestra (2023), Ye. Stankovych's "Ukraine. Music of War" for symphony orchestra and choir (2023), I. Shcherbakov's "Anxieties of our Nights" for piano and orchestra (2023), etc. O. Ilnytska's "To Victory" for vocal sextet and symphony orchestra complements the list.

O. Ilnytska's symphony works demonstrate genre diversity of contemporary Ukrainian symphonism, where national composer school's achievements, Western European traditions, and the means of contemporary musical language are organically combined. All of her works testify to the composer's perfect mastering of orchestral writing. Not only imagery but also scale and philosophical thinking have reflected in each of them. The author's passion for cosmology, her philosophical, theological and metaphysical studies at Thomas Aquinas Institute in Kyiv influenced her musical reception. In her thesis work "Symphonic picture" (2001) the composer created a cosmological conception by means of timbrally dense and mobile musical texture. In the Concerto for Cello and orchestra (2010) the Cello appears as a timbre bearer of a deep philosophical narrative. The piece "To Victory" for vocal sextet and symphony orchestra (2023) not only became a sound semiosphere of Russian-Ukrainian war, but a prospect of the Ukrainians' spiritual path.

O. Ilnytska's works draws contemporary musicologists' attention. After all, her music entered the European art space and it needs emotional and analytical understanding. Articles and interview with the composer, which are represented in the sites of musical online-editions⁴, testify the interest in her

² Huzhva, Oleksandr. "Ukrainian symphony in time – space of culture". In *Bulletin of the Kharkiv State Academy of design and arts*, 4, 2007, p. 24.

³ Kopytsia, Marianna. *Symphonies by B. Liatoshynskyi. Epoch, Collisions, Drama*. Muzychna Ukraina, 1990.

⁴ Safian, Dzvenyslava. "Olena Ilnytska: I don't like to repeat myself". In *The Claquers*, March 15, 2023 <https://theclaquers.com/posts/11066> (26.07.2025)

works. In her paper, Iryna Tukova⁵ remembers "To Victory" as the composer's reflection over Russian-Ukrainian war events. The author of the article had studied the composer's piano nocturnes in mythopoetic dimension⁶, choirs for children in the context of combination of traditions and innovations⁷. Ukrainian musicologists actively investigate works, connected to the war theme. The considerable number of their publications are presented in international editions⁸.

In this article, the symphony piece "To Victory", which has become the composer's reflection over the Russian-Ukrainian war events, is considered; the peculiarities of the composer's mythopoetic thinking are analyzed; the features of her style are cleared.

The objective of the paper is to define the characteristics of O. Ilnytska's mythopoetics in the symphony work "To Victory", since the composer speaks her own word expressively in the borders of the paradigm of symphony music.

Model of national worldview through the prism of the symphonic piece of Olena Ilnytska

The works of the contemporary Ukrainian composer Olena Ilnytska (1977) is known far beyond Ukraine. Except the domestic festivals "Kyiv Music Fest", "The Premiers of the Season", "The International Forum of Music of the Young", her works are presented at the concerts of electronic music studio at the Paris Conservatory (Paris, France, June 25, 2022), Ukrainian Contemporary Music Festival: Tribute to Borys Liatoshynsky in Merkin Hall, Kaufman Music Center (New-York, USA, March 18, 2023), author's concert at the International Artists Villa Concordia (Bamberg, Germany, November 2, 2023), the 19th festival

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https://zbruc.eu/node/116754?fbclid=IwAR02kCui4X6sVfvpSp1_Q3PgSoAKwr-VB1OhNNiaekjmwVJaCiTZXIU4-gY (27.07.2025)

⁵ Tukova, Iryna. "Vox Humana of War: Ukrainian Art Music as a Mode of Resistance (2022–24)". In *Musicology Today*, vol. 21, 2024, pp. 3–11. <https://doi.org/10.2478/muso-2024-0002>

⁶ Yakymchuk, Olena. "Mythopoetics of Piano Nocturnes by Olena Ilnytska". In *Harmonia: Journal of Arts Research and Education*, vol. 25 (1), 2025, pp. 1–12
<https://doi.org/10.15294/harmonia.v25i1.13242>

⁷ Yakymchuk, Olena. "Olena Ilnytska's choir work for children: in the intersection of domestic traditions. In *Věda a perspektivy*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2023, pp. 273–283.
[https://doi.org/10.52058/2695-1592-2023-1\(20\)-273-283](https://doi.org/10.52058/2695-1592-2023-1(20)-273-283)

⁸ Tukova, Iryna. "Art Music and War: Ukrainian Case 2022". In *Musicologica Brunensia*, vol. 58(2) 2023, pp. 193–204 <https://doi.org/10.5817/MB2023-2-12>

Yakymchuk, Olena; Riezniak, Olena. The war topos in Ivan Nebesnyi's works (on the example of "Message from Ukraine" and "...While recalling...". In *Studia Universitatis Babes-Bolyai Musica*, 70 (Special Issue 1), 2025, pp. 309–321.
<https://doi.org/10.24193/subbmusica.2025.spiss1.18>

“Tage der Neuen Musik” (Bamberg, Germany, November 12, 2023), Ukrainian literature evening at the International Artists Villa Concordia (Bamberg, Germany, November 27, 2024).

The piece “To Victory” for vocal sextet and symphony orchestra (2023) was written to order of the Polish art fund “Pro Musica Viva” in collaboration with “Most the Most” fund and the bank of regional economy. It was performed on the 10th of September, 2023 at the closing of the international festival “Days of Ukrainian Music in Warsaw” by the “proMODERN” vocal sextet (Warsaw) and Wrocław Philharmonic Orchestra under the baton of Polish-Ukrainian conductor Roman Rewakowicz⁹. The festival is one of the largest promotions in Polish art space with regard to concentration of Ukrainian music in it. Therefore, inviting a composer to take part in the festival is a responsible and honored mission.

In the process of O. Ilnytska's works research, it becomes noticeable how the symbols of a concrete text in her music grow to a mythopoetic structure, present in the other opuses of the composer. Continuity of the symbols and archetypical interconnection create a higher level of narration, characteristic of her music. E. Cassirer explained this process by definition of a myth not only as a made-up story, but also by the form of thinking, where the symbol is not a sign but a reality in human mind¹⁰.

Reconstruction of mythopoetic worldview is a feature of O. Ilnytska's artistic and aesthetic attitude. On studying a religious man's worldview through symbols, rituals, and myths, M. Eliade concluded that symbols become myths as universal archetypes, gaining sacral measurement¹¹. O. Ilnytska, being a deeply believing person, strives for integrity and harmoniousness of the world order and therefore proclaims such a world ratio in her own works.

The piece's title “To Victory” has double semantics. Firstly, it means not a given, but a way to what all Ukrainians crave for. That is why such a victory needs tireless labor from each. Secondly, the word “Victory” begins with a capital character; it means not a general noun, but a concrete and stable victory in this war. In such a title the author lays the program on an optimistic final of the piece, which she brings to life in the last part.

Mythologization takes place on genre, thematic, timbre and dramaturgic levels.

⁹ The performing of the piece “To Victory” is available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A964Ke7KO9A&list=PLsJZF0cNtXZoCKj5IRQbnCMx_cvWCOWNe&index=17

¹⁰ Cassirer, Ernst. *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Vol. 2: Mythical Thought*, Yale University Press, 1955. p. 55.

¹¹ Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (W.R. Trask, Trans.). New York: Harvest/HBJ Publishers, 1957. p. 61.

O. Ilnytska poetizes *the genre of symphony music*. It is notable that the composer doesn't call her works symphonies, but a symphony picture, a symphony piece. Fifty-minute-piece "To Victory" could well have been called a symphony; however, the word is absent in the title. It gives the author enough space for mythopoetizing of a complicated, historically established genre and the possibility for saying her own word in it. At the same time, the scale of a big symphony orchestra creates grounds for deep reflecting the genre of symphony music; it has philosophical rationale in the history of the world music. A one-part form gives a possibility of creating an arbitrary structure in confines of the paradigm of symphony music. In this genre, as in other ones, O. Ilnytska bravely overcomes stereotypes of thinking and broadens the notion of what a symphony work should be like. "To Victory" is indicative both for understanding of mythopoetics of symphony music and the author's symphonic thinking, which revealed itself in the skill of large-scale thinking, combining different musical-semantic intonation models, uniting them in an integrate structure.

Mythologization on the thematic level occurs through contrasting of binary oppositions of Ukrainian and Russian worlds. Thus, the Russian world is represented by the sound-recording of air attacks and the motif of the Russian folk song "Kalinka", which has a harsh character, sung at a fast pace by woodwinds and strings. The tune is not so much noticeable for ear, but is visible in the score, where O. Ilnytska laid it out by means of micro-polyphony. This motif emerges in sound imaging episodes of air attacks and evokes a feeling of horror. The theme sounds several times, every times destroying previous musical-intonation model of peaceful Ukrainian space (a mother's talk with a daughter, the lullaby "Oy, hodyt son" ("The sleep is walking"), children's vesnianka game "Vydy, vydy, sonechko" ("Come out, come out, sunshine"), the sunrise after night air attacks). Rapid motifs of "Kalinka" form a short dialogue with a cello melody, which impersonates injured Ukrainian soul (figure 9); they destroy a habitual order, creating chaos (figures 12, 49) (e. g. 1).

E.g. 1

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Olena Ilnytska "To Victory", measures 116–118.

O. Ilnytska chose Ukrainian folk songs ("Oy, hodyt son" ("The sleep is walking"), "Vyidy, vyidy, sonechko" ("Come out, come out, sunshine")), and a Transcarpathian song "Plyve kacha" ("A duck is swimming")¹² for the main themes of Ukrainian world. All of them not only are interpreted by the composer in intonation, but also in philosophical-existential sense. The vocal version of the lullaby "Oy, hodyt son", the instrumental version of children's vesnianka "Vyidy, vyidy, sonechko" are organically integrated into the general dramaturgy; they sound in the first part of the symphonic piece. The songs mentioned are attributed for children, who are the most vulnerable to the disasters of war¹³. O. Ilnytska opposes musical-intonation sound imaging spheres of war and of children world, sharpening the conflict between them.

"Plyve kacha" was sung during the first and second world wars. It became, in a way, a historical code of Ukrainian nation. Since the Euromaidan (2014) it grew to a hymn-requiem to the dead warriors. It is iconic for O. Ilnytska in her music¹⁴. The author used its motif in her piano piece "Reflections 2", which as well is a reaction to the events of the Russian-Ukrainian war. These events are also reflected in the works by Andrii Liubka and Iryna Tsilyk. It must be noted that the composer is demanding to the song-poetic basis. For her works she chooses primary sources with deep textual and musical semantics. So, the song "Plyve kacha" is a core of the symphony piece "To Victory".

As a genuine master of orchestration, O. Ilnytska defines *semantic field for instruments and human voices*. Thus, fast drum fraction creates anxious background, in front of which the theatre of war develops itself. Monotone continuity of typical formulas evokes tension and fear. Percussion

¹² The song's authors and origins are unknown. The researcher Vasyl Sokol argued that the song has a literary basis, since the first couplet was published in Transcarpathian writer and translator Vasyl Grange-Donsky's collection "Kvity z ternom" ("Flowers with blackthorn", Uzhhorod, 1923). The folklorist Ivan Hlanta witnesses that the song was for the first time noted by the composer and ethnographer Dezyderii Zador in 1940s in Volovtsi, Transcarpathia. "Plyve kacha" sounded during the first and second world wars; fighters of Carpathian Sich sang it in 1930s. Since 1960s it was performed by Ukrainian singers – Vira Bahanych, Oksana Bilozir, Viktor Morozov, Taras Chubai, and also by groups "Plach Yeremii", "Skriabin". Its most popular performance was that by "Pikkardiiska tertsiia". The Lviv group sang it on Euromaidan, at the funeral of Belorussian activist Mykhail Zhyznevskiy, in January, 2014. Since that time, a tradition was established to sing it during farewell to perished heroes of the Revolution of dignity, Russian-Ukrainian war.

¹³ A problem of deportation of Ukrainian children, whom Russia took on its territory without permission, arose acutely during the Russian-Ukrainian war. Besides it, the sphere of children's world marks brightly horrific pictures of bombing of the maternity hospital, theatre, in front of which "Children" is written in Mariupol, in March, 2022.

¹⁴ The 2004 and 2014 revolutions O. Ilnytska met on the Euromaidan, among a million throng of people, who fought for European democratic values. That is why "Plyve kacha", which sounded on the Euromaidan 2014 became a part of her life, an intonation code of the Ukrainian people's tragedy.

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(bells, chimes, vibraphone) envelops with tender, fairy sounding, connected to reflection of children's world. Besides, they signify transcendent station (a transition between worlds), an enlightenment effect. The dulcimer adds a national touch to symphonic sound, making association with Ukrainian world. Tam-tam and bass-drum create deep overtone aura, which combines with other timbres. Two short cello narrations symbolize wounded Ukrainian soul. In the third part brass winds calls to cohesion, to the Cossack spirit's and inner forces' mobilization.

Special role in the symphonic score belongs to the singers' voices. Genre palette of their sounding is diverse enough; therefore, different episodes have different semantic filling. The dialogue between a mother and a daughter (*Mommy, sing me a lullaby*), where soprano and mezzo-soprano 1 sing the mother's and the daughter's parts, and mezzo-soprano 2 – the lullaby itself (vocalize), is tremblingly tender. In the song "Oy, hodyt son" mezzo-soprano 1 sings the lullaby, other voices recreate whistling and hissing sounds (*s-s-s, ts-ts-ts, sh-sh-sh, ch-ch-ch*), as if they are asking for quietness for the child (e. g. 2). The singers depict very naturally various stations of the injured people's despair and sorrow: sobbing (combination of vocalize and *brumendo* on long sounds; figures 26–28), sighing (*glissando* between two tones; figures 31–32), whining (singing within minor third; figure 43).

E.g. 2

The image shows a musical score for measures 342-349. It includes staves for Soprano (S.), Mezzo-soprano 1 (Mz. sopr. 1), Mezzo-soprano 2 (Mz. sopr. 2), Tenor (T.), Bass (Br.), and Bass (B.). The vocal parts feature various sounds like 'Th', 'Ch', 'S', 'Sh', and 'Ts' with dynamic markings like 'mp' and 'f'. The instrumental parts include strings and woodwinds.

Olena Ilnytska "To Victory", measures 342–349

On the dramaturgic level mythologization is manifested in the structure of the work, which has three parts (real life, funeral service for the perished, transition beyond the borders of the worlds). It corresponds to the three levels of the world system (earthly, underground, heavenly ones). In the first part the episodes of peaceful life (the talk between the mother and

the daughter, the lullaby, the sunrise, following the night air attack, the children's game) interchange with air attacks. Their sequence is signed by the change of tempo, characteristic of mythopoetic flow of *chronos*: slow singing of the lullaby changes with rapid running of war events.

The categories of musical time and space are characterized by heterogeneity. In the *chronotope*, time is compressed at the moment of sounding of the lexemes, portraying war attacks (fast passages, the motif of Russian folk song "Kalinka", sharp dotted rhythm); widens during the dialogue of the mother and the daughter, the lullaby's sounding, the scenes of peaceful life, lamentations). Music, which consists of different rhythmical formulas, creates the effect of changing of various phases of time dimension: rapid motion and its delay in the vector plane; day and night – in the cyclic one. Such a changing looks at the macro-level in the sequence: fluidity (the first part) – deceleration (the second part, "Plyve kacha") – fluidity (the third part).

The second part. "Plyve kacha" absorbed sufferings of all 20th century revolutionary and war events it had voiced. In the symphonic piece nine-minute a *cappella* performance by a vocal sextet turns into a *requiem* for all who have perished in the Russian-Ukrainian war. Strong genre basis of the funeral lamentations recreates crying of hundreds of thousands people. There are no most archaic parts here, such as crying, callings for the dead. This type of lamentation is kin to lyrical songs, which have mutual poetic images and symbolic¹⁵.

O. Ilnytska has kept the structure of the poetic text. In return, her musical interpretation is far more spread out, than the original. It manifests, firstly, in long singing of syllables: the composer strengthened longing of the song, making it more and more closer to lamentation. The characteristics of this genre are: long and complicated singing of syllables, presence of melismatics, grace notes, trills), rhythmic variety (syncopation, triples, tied notes, combination of different note durations), improvisation. The musical texture is saturated with polyphonic imitations, which strengthen the effect of *lamento*. The type of Melos is declamation (not melodious) (M. Haidai's classification¹⁶). In spite of stable measure $\frac{4}{4}$, rhythmical organizing gives impression of a free form of reciting, improvisation, characteristic of this genre.

Baritone voice sings the main tune and personifies the son-warrior who has to go to the army and leave his home. The development of musical texture and dramaturgy occurs gradually. The solo in the first couplet is replaced by four-voice imitation texture in the second one. The shift of tonality (the only one in all the song) takes place twice in the third couplet (*kh to zh*

¹⁵ Hrushevskyi, Mykhailo. History of Ukrainian literature. Lubid, 1990, p. 151.

¹⁶ Haidai, Mykhailo. Folk lamentations. In *Ethnographic Bulletin*, vol. 7, 1928, p. 68.

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my bude braty yamu?). Choral texture emphasizes harmonic comparison (e – g – h – fis), with which O. Ilnytska marked semantic culmination of the song, thus drawing the hearer’s attention to it. Chord replicas of men interchange weeping women’s intonations. Here they are the most perceptible (which the semantic field of the poetic text points to); after all, the phrases have downward direction, chromaticisms, descending *glissando*. The soprano’s expressive replicas are associated to the mother’s weeping (e. g. 3).

E.g. 3

The musical score for measures 558-572 of "To Victory" by Olena Ilnytska is presented for a vocal sextet and piano. The parts are arranged vertically: Soprano (S.), Mezzo Soprano 1 (Mz. sopr. 1), Mezzo Soprano 2 (Mz. sopr. 2), Tenor (T.), Bass (B.), and Baritone (B.). The lyrics are in Ukrainian: "Khto z my bu-de bra - ty ya - mu, [u] khto z my bu - de...". The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like 'f' and 'p'. The piano part is indicated by 'p' and 'f' markings.

Olena Ilnytska “To Victory”, measures 558–572

The fourth couplet is saturated by imitations: in men’s parts of the basic melody, in women’s ones – lamentation. In the fifth couplet the composer combined variation and imitation principles (*yak by meni, synku, ne zhal?*), having given this phrase to the feminine voices. The last phrase

of the fifth couplet (*ty zh na moim sertsyu lezhav*) in homophonic texture appears as a summary. Clear choral verticals equalize the previous branched horizontal. This choral motif-mytheme will sound as an echo in the instrumental epilogue. In the last sentence the violins and violas enter, taking the relay from the vocal sextet.

In the instrumental postscript O. Ilnytska combined the intonations of the tune "Plyve kacha" with the lamentation, having created eight-voice imitation texture from violins' and violas' parts in the shape of continuous canon. The string-timbre postlude gives time for reflection over the things heard. Further timbre polylogue, which consists of cellos', dulcimer's, bells', woodwinds', and timpani's replicas, terminates the second part with the intonations of the hymn-requiem of Euromaidan.

The third part is a sound-recording of accumulating of strength and power, gradual transformation and spiritual purifying. There are several waves of development here which smoothly transition into each other. Drums (bass-drum, drums, tam-tam) depict the birth of inner strength, thus creating resistant basis for spiritual transformations. Signals-calls of the brass winds are gaining momentum, becoming more powerful, seething in the background of continuous formulas of the timpani and drums. You can feel accumulation of Cossack spirit and inner strength in them. Trombones and trumpets add more strength and power. On the wave of that solemnity the tune of Ukrainian hymn, like a semantic signal of victory, appears in violas', cellos', and second violins' parts.

On the next wave the thesaurus of musical language undergoes changes. The general direction is marked by the motion from the earthly to the heavenly: the violins conquer the third octave tessitura and gain the limit of their range; harps' and cymbals' phrases are built in upward motion, vibraphone's and bells' timbres are indicators of the transition from the physical to the metaphysical. In the sacral sound space, there emerge the intonations of the choral motif "Plyve kacha", played by trombones and woodwinds; it closes the gestalt of its melody, creating the feeling of completeness of the life cycle, transforming the death into a new life.

The intonations of Ukrainian anthem, performed by women's vocal parts and cymbals, appear in the code again. The composer has used vocalize as a pure timbre in order to continue the idea of transformation-purifying. Feminine voices become instruments, which are identify with metaphysical sounding. The strings' flageolets, the harp's and the bells' light tremolo create a general aura of light, celestial, divine sounding. In spite of collisions, which dominated during the symphonic piece, its conclusion is bright and optimistic enough. It is similar to the idea of nurturing the spirit, spiritual purifying, realized in O. Ilnytska's vocal cycle "Sam na sam" ("Alone") on V. Stus' lyrics.

The protagonist finishes his earthly life and, having purified himself, passes into another world. Works' optimistic conclusion not only is a characteristic feature of her style, but her world relation, that is, her sacral relation (after V. Lychkovah¹⁷) to the humans and their life.

Conclusion

The piece "To Victory" is an indicator of symphonic thinking of O. Ilnytska and her mythopoetic interpreting of the symphonic genre. It has a clear and understandable program, bright imagery and scale. The author has used folk musical-intonation thesaurus (Ukrainian folk songs "Oy, hodyt son", "Vyidy, vyidy, sonechko") for reconstruction of children's world, which undergoes devastating destruction during the war. Genre models of lamentations, lyrical songs, which are actualized in the central part of the work – "Plyve kacha" – became spokesmen of hundreds of thousands of people's sufferings. Mythologization of the dichotomy "Me – the world" is marked with philosophical content, which needs deep reflection of the hearer.

As other works of O. Ilnytska, "To Victory" has optimistic finale; after all, the author models the world, in which she wants to live. She is convinced – it will be such as she creates it. In the path to Victory we can feel baroque sublimity, which manifests in musical-stylistic traits (polyphony of the texture, micropolyphony), and also in the human's existential choice – in the heading to the Light with the faith in the Victory.

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¹⁷ Lychkovakh, Volodymyr. *The philosophy of ethnoculture: theoretical, methodological and aesthetic aspects of Ukrainian cultural history*. Parapan, 2011.

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