

## CHORALS OF LIGHT AND DARKNESS: MULTIPLE IDENTITIES IN THE WORLD OF CONTEMPORARY LITHUANIAN MUSIC

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**Abstract.** Lithuanian composers in their own way fulfil M. K. Čiurlionis's (1875–1911) visionary oath: the *creation of the world* through the synthesis of arts initiated by waves of imagination, i.e., their works show a tendency to create an organic whole or universe that embodies the utopia of the eternal existence as the forgotten world of light of archaic myths and the fullness of its Baltic nature. An example of this is the universe of *sutartinės* (multipart polyphonic songs) created by Ričardas Kabelis (\*1957) – the embodiment of Baltic mythology within the *circle of eternity* of musical sounds – the *chorale of light* of *sutartinės*, a vision of the endless humming sound of canon. This is the line of Baltic identity ("Sutartinė of the Mountain", 2011–2016), deeply embedded in the perception of Lithuanian music. Meanwhile, as a counterbalance, we can identify the identity line of European historical drama by Kabelis's former student Mykolas Natalevičius (\*1985) through the Christian *rising from darkness* chorale, its variations, the interactions of hymns, and their dramatic development, which flow into images of historicism and sacredness. Here, we consistently move from early Christianity to the theme of Ukraine, which is deeply rooted in the modern thinking of Lithuanian intellectuals, complementing the European line – a new turn in the struggle between the shadows of darkness and light (Natalevičius's chorale of the "Chorale of the Vanishing Light", 2023). In this context, another expression of identity emerges in the works of Algirdas Martinaitis (\*1950) as an exploration of ideas of the era, exemplified by his premiere of the work "Gija", dedicated to Sakartvelo's European journey, which is closely connected to Lithuania, and linking it to the musical significance of the name of the most distinguished Georgian

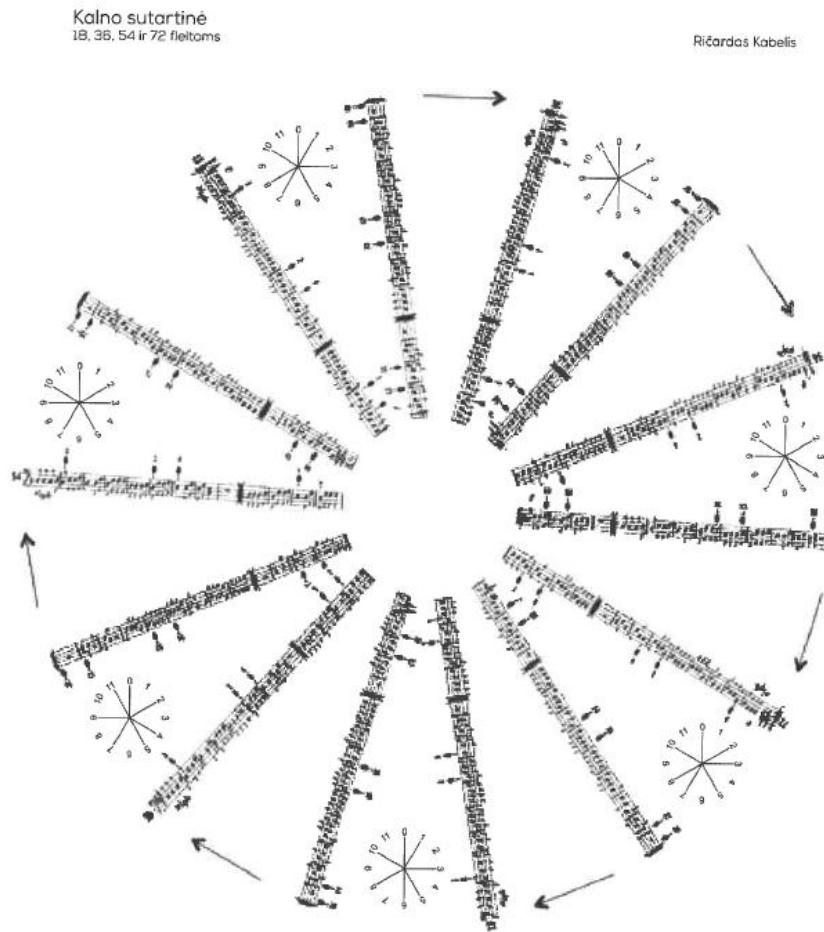
composer of the 20th century, Giya Kancheli (1935–2019). “Gija” is also a meaningful Lithuanian word (Martinaitis is also a master of language), meaning a connection, a bond, a line of fabric – a leitmotif and a deeply penetrating paradigm of Ukrainian suffering into the existential depths of the Baltic and Caucasian origins. In this way, the multifunctional fabric of Lithuanian musical creation, revived in the current struggle of identities, unfolds with its ornamental lines, restoring to radiance the spaces of Europe that were once obscured by barbaric darkness.

**Keywords:** light; darkness; sutartinė; chorale; Kabelis; Natalevičius; Martinaitis; Ukraine; Giya.

Thanks to historical experiences, a well-defined approach to identity expression has developed in Lithuanian music, serving as a defensive (existential defence) line that transcends the landscape of Baltic identity. Here, the long-anticipated national modernism unfurled its wings, rooted in folkloric melodic structures and, notably, the remarkable cyclical polyphonism of the multipart song *sutartinė* circle. The paradigm of the concordance of multipart song *sutartinė* evolved through various modernisation transformations across the 20th century: the “rhythmic monotony” of Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis (1875–1911) (Čiurlionis 1960: p. 299), the national impressionism of Juozas Gruodis (1884–1948), the theory of supporting tones in the union of folklore intonation cells with Juzeliūnas’ dodecaphony (1916–2001) (Juzeliūnas 1972), and pagan archaism – avant-garde transforming into the sacred Baltic minimalism of Bronius Kutavičius (1932–2021). This paradigmatic line has reached the level of philosophical global conceptualism characteristic of the modern era (20th–21st centuries) and has garnered attention in fundamental scientific research (Račiūnaitė-Vyčinienė 2018: p. 598). It has now ascended to the extraordinary heights of transcendental historicism, transforming into the Baltic archetype – the code of our time – and unfolding the image of the harmony of *sutartinė* as a universe of global concordance, illuminated by the utopian rumble of light, and a visionary system of the circle of concordance – the eternal pulsation of light within the transparent space of intonations – as if a work of the heights of the world spirit proclaiming Buddhist nirvana. This development is exemplified by one of the most theoretical composers of the rationalist tradition today, Ričardas Kabelis (b. 1957). His works evoke national sacredness and the

universe, the global code of the nations' existence pulsating with mathematical regularity, intertwined with nature. Such characterises Lithuanian phenomenism, whose guardian today is Ričardas Kabelis. We refer to his *sutartinė*-like paradigm of the *sutartinė* universe; part of his works shines with light: *Sutartinė of the Mountain* [Kalno sutartinė] (2011), *Trejinė of the Mountain* [Kalno trejinė] (2016), *Confirmations of the Myth* [Mito sutvirtinės] (2018), *Call Signs* [Šaukiniai] (2019). This forms a specific philosophical interpretation of the musical space through the architecture of sounds – a choir, later 72 flutes, bells – creating a vibrating tumult of light – an immersion into the dream state so characteristic of Kabelis' aesthetics, a transcendent symbiosis of intonation cell and rhythmic monotony.

In this way, a Baltic ornamental fabric is created, embodying the sacred identity of the ethnos – a quasi-chorale of light whose pulsation conveys being to the *other space*, a unique field of timeless associations. Kabelis' work transcends the boundaries of the *Werkprinzip*. It already functions as an alternative system that is sustainable over time, where only fragments of the unity of form and function reflect the permeating detail that flows through the world of forms. In this extraordinary *universe*, the *Sutartinė of the Mountain*, pulsating as a manifestation of interstitial existence – a vision expressed through music – is also a completed point of creation that has reached its utopian peak. This encapsulates Kabelis' aesthetic vision, which results from “expulsion from the context of reality” (Linas Paulauskis and Vita Česnulevičiūtė in: *Ričardas Kabelis...* 2020) and the transformation of its core into a system of universality. It can be envisioned as a culmination of this aesthetic and a hymn to the end of infinity. The interaction of the folkloric modernist compositional technique reaches its finale – a symphony of *sutartinė*, composed for a *utopian* ensemble of instruments – 72 flutes – a universe of luminous impulses and natural ornamentation shining in the height of hum, opening the path to the Buddhist nirvana attained through musical pilgrimage. Thus, the Lithuanian genome of national modernism attains its moment of fulfilment... Yet, again, it seems that no dramaturgy remains – shadows, structural *maps* essential to the deep state – lines, concrete supports of historicism, fragments of memory, and meaningful codes of context.



Ričardas Kabelis. Example of *Sutartinė of the Mountain*, 2016.

The plains absorb the texture of the hum. This gap is filled by another wing of *non-emptiness – non-postmodern* philosophy in music. The secret of its balance is contact with darkness.

Mykolas Natalevičius (b. 1985). Composer Mykolas Natalevičius, a student of Ričardas Kabelis, once again shifts his focus to *context* – notably the European sacredness of the chorale, along with the sounds of bells and organs, where improvisational freedom and the non-systematic nature of the unknown merge, constantly drifting on the riffs of choral recitations. The principle of chorale variations in Natalevičius' works has become a second paradigm of Lithuanian music in the 21st century, alongside the revival of *sutartinė* songs and folklorism. His chorale also meaningfully encapsulates the expression of humming sounds and disrupts the unity of the static circle. Therefore, his concept of sacredness is traditionally different – retrospective in absorbing the spirit of recent epochs but also stimulating historical memory solely through the

religious lens of Christian imagery. The tumultuous intersection of standing harmony intervals is significant for Natalevičius, inviting one to immerse oneself in an ocean of time, as if observing through the columns of sacred architecture. This dilemma of chord dualism, of disrupted harmony, finds resolution in sustainability, in limitless time as the lines of an all-encompassing structure, modelling the vision of infinity. Conversely, his works naturally release melodic projections compressed within schemes into a flowing sequence of variations, flooding the texture with a peculiar realisation of the cyclical tone of Baltic Self and the dynamism of process-driven dramaturgy. Here, the role of the chorale assumes two poles: static and processual, both responding to the phenomenological transformation of Baltic minimalism in contemporary soundscapes. Unlike Kabelis' work, here the pilgrimage towards Enlightenment and the contact with depths of darkness open up, whereas in Kabelis' concepts, the collective space of Baltic identity dissolves into the unity of minimalism and enlightenment, transforming into wholeness and complete purification. Meanwhile, Natalevičius' *return to context* echoes the *absorption* of historical elements into narrative architecture, distinguished by towers of memory and attentiveness to visions of *remembering something* in the shadow. The prerogative of the *dream* alludes clearly to the sacred space of the chorale. Yet, for that dynamism, *contact with darkness* and the textures of liberation is necessary – perhaps a return. Natalevičius' works themselves should serve as a testimony to that.

**Dramaturgy and processes of the works.** *LA* (2014) are variations of the *la* chorale based on the name of Loreta Asanavičiūtė, who was killed under a Russian tank near the Vilnius TV Tower on 13 January 1991 (l – loreta, a – asanavičiūtė). It is a chorale wrapped around the melodic line of the note *la*, dedicated to Loreta Asanavičiūtė. It features a traditional confrontation of two texture types: the static framing of chord verticals and the rise of movement flows to a climactic eclipse, leading to dynamism through the dramaturgy of energy breakthroughs. Being in the zone of traditional conflict dramaturgy, the author remains in the field of expression of the Baltic identity, striving for a unique symbiosis of two poles, a form of fulfilment of heights. It

can be achieved only by going *into silence* – a post-ecliptic meditation, a field of reflections against the background of crumbling fragments of the chorale. Natalevičius appears strong precisely in the restituted *going into the silence* of the minimalism era, in the uncompromising transformation of the aesthetics of the chorale into a *silent turn of the world*. In that poetics, the phenomenon of the *stopped time* of the Baltic identity is achieved.

The principles of statics and flow breakthrough in the chorale merge into an unconstrained architecture of flow and time in Natalevičius's subsequent work, *Journey to Unknown* [Kelionė į nežinią] for flute and organ (2018). Here, the composer explores the organ's magic of rhythmic asymmetry and sound continuity, infused with the flute's transcendental quality. All this involves the dissolution of the chorale into the *other space*, not only in a rhetorical sense but also in a meditative spread of sound beneath the vaults of images, as the *flight of thought opens into the unknown*. In this way, the potential for spatial sound vision is tested, along with its contact with the liminality of music and the silence that echoes behind the projection of the work.

Natalevičius' latest work also tests human nature and the journey towards the intersection of light and darkness. It is *Chorale of the Vanishing Light* [Gėstantčios šviesos chorallas] for organ (2023), dedicated to Ukraine and its people, fighting for their freedom and the prospect of existence in the light of European values. It is a choice of the path to the West, breaking the established framework of marginality. What Lithuania and its people have long understood has become a fundamental aspect of their existence. Here, the chorale *emerges from the depths of darkness and despair*, reminiscent of the origins of Christianity, confronting brutality, savage hatred, and murderous cruelty. It breaks into its line and then rises again. Natalevičius' work, unique in its kind, is filled with the painful resolve of impatience, despair, and non-Enlightenment intentions, as if awaiting a falling sword that cuts through the substance of the song... At its core, rising from fragments and looming ruins into chorale motifs, is the Ukrainian patriotic song “Oi, u luzi chervona kalyna”.

Here is a necessary ecliptic break, the expectation of which is well

reflected in Natalevičius' chorale but only as an expectation. This paradigm of the Baltic peoples' identity is connected with the dramaturgy of archetypes – the silent turn of the world, contact with darkness, and the threat of extinction. The aggressor needs to break the determination of the Ukrainians' will, the strength of their spirit, which has now risen as an expression of national identity. This is a profound and resilient Self whose mission is to break the paradigm of the *invincibility* of Russian imperialism. This imperialism is associated with darkness by the Baltic Selfhood and acknowledged as absolute by the world. The title of the new monograph by historian and politician Valdas Rakutis about the sunset of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the 17th–18th centuries is symptomatic in this sense: “Before Plunging into Twilight. When Poland and Warsaw Were Ours.” (Rakutis 2022). This expresses the deep necessity of Lithuanian historical identity connections with Europe, eternal nostalgia, and the desire to correct the *plunge into twilight* through meaningful semantic codes.

Therefore, this paradigm of the struggle between darkness and light emerges today as a desperate battle, a chorus of the vital survival of nations passing through the *Mannerheim Line* of Ukraine. This is the yet-unrecognised code of Europe's destiny: the power of the union state of Christian-Judaic identity consensus. Not allowing it to *sink into the darkness of twilight*.

Natalevičius' *Choral of the Vanishing Light* is a Lithuanian prayer on the theme of Ukraine – about the survival of nations and states. The light must not go out – this is how the composer tries to find a way out, to inspire faith in the nation through his music and not to succumb to the mystical nostalgia of the sunset past of Europe.

A complex process of identity involving light and darkness is unfolding. This time, the horizon of Ukraine, which for Lithuania has become the apocalyptic herald of the new 21st-century era, has deeply imprinted itself into the ideas of national survival and statehood. For Lithuania, the question of Ukrainian identity has become personal, intertwined with a fateful dimension before slipping into twilight, when the delicate existential trajectory of ascent opens up in a new form of universality – the pressure of great powers versus resistance. This all-

too-familiar *turning point, orchestrated by global forces* faced with historiographical puzzles blocking reality (Putin's historical views), hybrid actions, and outright genocidal destruction, is experienced by Lithuanians not only with great sensitivity but also simply fatally, on the creative *front line*, reminiscent of the poetry of catastrophic modernism after World War II in America: "Ir mirtis nebus nugalėta/And death will not be defeated..." (Mackus 1999: p. 170). In 2023, composer Mykolas Natalevičius, commenting on his *Chorale of the Vanishing Light* – perhaps unconsciously justifying the reason for *vanishing* and possibly encoding a *disbelief* in Ukraine's victory – responds to this dilemma:

It can be translated into English as fading, dying, or *vanishing* light... **The light fades, vanishes, and then something changes.**

It is not easy to find a logical sequence here... but I wanted to show that tension, when tension turns into light, and that light fades **but does not fade completely**. It is like a lingering hope, and that quote from the melody of the song "Oi, u luzi chervona kalyna," from which almost the entire piece is created, is a **quote of hope**.

I could have finished more positively. However, perhaps such incompleteness is a good thing, which more accurately reflects the present (Mykolas Natalevičius, a letter to J. L., 2023.09.20).

Thus, the present becomes the chorale's hum in the question zone: between light and darkness. Its transitivity is determined by darkness, the contact of the Baltic identity with darkness, which occurs not within the system of ethnos cycles, nor in the *sutartinė* song's trajectory, but in the path of the chorale's Christian challenges. Kabelis unfolds *sutartinė* song into an ancient utopia, the idyll of tribal existence, nirvana, a dream of light, a transcendental space. Meanwhile, Natalevičius' chorale becomes a field of struggle with darkness, a *front line* – a fading but unextinguished light, a cradle of hope at the dawn of a grey hour. Like a lullaby, its melody rocks Lithuania's new identity, opening towards Ukraine. This aspect of Selfhood deepens and strengthens like a river, the current of which brings new strength, directional actual historicism, faith in European roots and deeply profound choice. And precisely this aspect of **depth** here coincides with the line of the darkness-fading-brightening vault of light and the meditation and verticalisation of the

chorale, a breakthrough into the texture of struggle, acquiring its identity (from swing to rhythmic syncopation of accents). Therefore, Natalevičius' work can be considered a new leitmotif of the chorale mission, also predicting the identity changes of the nation's historical role.

Notably, the patriotic song is woven into a hymn with existential religious content, transforming into a hum that explores transcendentalism in the dawn between light and darkness. The process of re-evaluating paradigms begins, which in music is powerfully expressed through universality – the interaction of vertical (harmony) and horizontal (melody) in the transcendentalism of apocalyptic historicism – the mutability of darkness and light in the organ hum, and in the *front line* ultimately becomes as a work of music—culminating in the image of a chorale. In the finale, the melody of a Ukrainian song emerges from the depths of the hum – trembling between the horizons of light and darkness, which should focus on the strength of identity, appearing... and gaining clarity... but then seems to disintegrate, retreating into the depths, darkness, and the shadows of *stopped* time. As a result, the chorale remains within the unresolved, anxious interval paradigm, as if left with an endless question... This reflects a characteristic decision by Natalevičius – to leave the space unresolved (*Karachay*, 2015; *Journey into the Unknown*, 2018; *Gas Flare*, 2022). The relationship between space and sound here is based on a faint air whiff, an embryo transforming into a spectral of becoming – a spark of faith, extinction, and renewal amidst darkness – which stabilises in the image of the chorale, expanding the horizon of indeterminacy and infinity.

Instead of the dramaturgy eclipsing the processes of Selfhood from the anticipated Enlightenment, one sinks once more into the depths, closing in on the transcendental integral of hope and pain, the cell of the song's motif, its distant, indistinct hum... Therefore, the chorale seems unable to be crowned with the semantics of light; it remains a *vanishing light*, with the hope that it will not go out... There are no traditional clear solutions, only an infinite line of ending – non-ending with its ellipses...

Chorale of the Vanishing Light  
Blėstančios šviesos chorala

Mykolas Natalevičius

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Example: Mykolas Natalevičius *Choral of the Vanishing Light*, 2023

How should one assess the projection of meaning in such a work? Or the role of the chorale in the geopolitical shift of music? The chorale here blends with the patriotic Ukrainian war song, and therein lies its new global aspect – the significance of the universality of Christian values in the sphere of cultural philosophy, actively participating in the struggle for the enlightenment of Selfhood. This includes crossing red lines and the psychological transformation of art.

A new historical context is illuminated. The lines in the musical texture convey the meaning of philosophical geopolitics – the static and dynamic aspects of crossing boundaries in the sense of the aesthetic contrast between light and darkness. The most important element here is the transformation of the chorale from a song into a hymn through the pulsation of polyphonic breakthroughs and lullabies.

Natalevičius' *choralness* is always rooted in the principle of ostinato variations and *breaking* it into the uniformity of static elements. This encourages listeners to wait for the duration of the melodic wave of *fulfilment* to unfold over time through emotional engagement. The rhetoric of tradition, the meaning of national intonation, which merges into the universe of Christian choral music, remains. This seemingly cosmic realm of sacredness significantly broadens the visionary scope of *sutartinė*, incorporating aspects of Western globality. This also highlights the strength of Natalevičius' uniqueness and the innate instinct of Lithuanian religious identity, which is open and explores deeper dimensions. The idea of depth in music is crucial here, and it is shaped by the sonority of choral harmony.

Algirdas Martinaitis (\*1950) is recognised as an artist who explores the archetypes of the book of nature, bird, and Eurorealist identities. He is an actor of unexpected actions, stage gestures, and words, transforming the ideas of music and improvisation into the untamed essence governed by the laws of nature. His *wild* Lithuanianness and unconventional play with concepts do not limit him from expanding musical imagery into the baroque, Japanese, and Jewish ethnic sound worlds (*Visa for Life*, 2020). He also pushes the boundaries of European aesthetics with his texts (Gaidamavičiūtė 2023). His recent works incorporate personally close people who have already passed away, as well as nations at the crossroads of history. In the premiere of his work *Gija* in 2025, the composer presents a significant portrait of Georgia/Sakartvelo through one of its most prominent 20th-century musical figures, composer Giya Kancheli (1935–2019). Here, Lithuanian and Kartvelian influences merge into the vibrant, resonant silence of Kancheli's *Angel of Sorrow*, creating connections with reflections on Ukraine and the present, which has reignited the paradigm of the struggle for freedom.

Martinaitis' *Gija* is both a name, a sound, and the meaning of a word that connects nations (*gija* is a Lithuanian word; it can also be interpreted as a connection). Thus, connection, line, melody, the sound of silence, and listening to the hum of Ukraine's pain make this work unfold, focusing on the special unity of nations, longing, freedom, and the silent sacredness of European values, known only to old civilisations. Such Martinaitis' touch on time also reveals his transformation as an

author, evolving from a mischievous Eurosceptic to someone immersed in the fading light of the chorale, delving into the civilisational depths within a drama of ordeals. We already have several works that affirm an intense spiritual connection to Ukraine (here we can also mention Tomas Juzeliūnas' (\*1964), *Blue-Yellow-Prelude* [Mėlynai geltonas preliudas], February 24, 2024). Therefore, the links and dissemination of identities currently occur within the aforementioned thematic space of Ukraine.

## Conclusions

We have several musical projections of the meaning of the Lithuanian identity. All of them are connected to the semantics of vision.

Folklore, specifically the genre of *sutartinės*, should be recognised as the traditional ethnic basis for music formation, in which the principles of cycle, repetition, echo, signs of sustainability and incompleteness, as well as aspects of deepening—archaisation—awakening. Čiurlionis named it a “rhythmic monotony” (Čiurlionis 1960: p. 299), summing up the motifs of Lithuanian songs – melodic intonation and rhythm. The principle of discontinuity – infinite continuity centralises the idea of sustainability and resistance to time, a kind of eternity metaphor and the universality of sound.

Meanwhile, the second projection of identity, the *rising from the darkness* of twilight, is summarised as a chorale, the transcendental nature of religious hymns that allows the transformation of global experiences of Lithuanianness and their openness to the world. The latter line of musical meaning in Lithuanian music seeks renewal, including the philosophically existential theme of Ukraine and the similar one of Georgia, descendant of the ancient civilisation, as a struggle between light and darkness in the field of the present, reflecting the never-disappearing global experience of history, the struggle against evil, its emerging context of continuity and ruptures.

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## ХОРАЛИ СВІТЛА І ТЕМРЯВИ: МНОЖИННІ ІДЕНТИЧНОСТІ У СВІТІ СУЧАСНОЇ ЛИТОВСЬКОЇ МУЗИКИ

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**Анотація.** Литовські композитори по-своєму дотримуються візіонерської клятви М. К. Чюрльоніса (1875–1911): *створення світу* через синтез мистецтва, ініційованого хвилями уяви. Іншими словами, їхні твори демонструють прагнення створити органічне ціле або всесвіт, які би втілювали утопію вічного буття як забутого світу світла архайчних міфів і різноманіття балтійської природи. Таким прикладом є всесвіт *сутартіне* (багатоголосих поліфонічних пісень), створених Річардасом Кабелісом (\*1957). Це втілення балтійської міфології в *колі вічності* музичних звуків, *хорал світла сутартіне*, візія нескінченного гудіння канону. Це лінія балтійської ідентичності («*Kalno sutartinė*», 2011–2016), глибоко вкорінена в сприйнятті литовської музики. Водночас, як противагу, ми можемо виділити лінію ідентичності європейської історичної драми в роботах колишнього учня Кабеліса – Миколаса Наталевічуса (\*1985). Вона проходить крізь християнський хорал, *що повстає з темряви*, його варіації, взаємодію гімнів та їхній драматичний розвиток, що трансформуються в образи історизму

й сакральності. Тут ми послідовно рухаємося від раннього християнства до теми України, яка глибоко вкорінена в сучасному мисленні литовських інтелектуалів, доповнюючи європейську лінію – новий поворот у протистоянні між тінями темряви та світла (хорал Наталевічуса «Gėstančios šviesos», 2023). У цьому контексті постає ще один вияв ідентичності у творчості Альгірдаса Мартінайтіса (\*1950) як дослідження ідей епохи. Яскравим прикладом є прем'єра твору «Gija», присвяченого європейському шляху Сакартвело (Грузії), тісно пов'язаного з Литвою. Твір посилається на музичне значення імені найвидатнішого грузинського композитора ХХ століття Гії Канчелі (1935–2019). «Gija» – це також багатозначне литовське слово, яке означає зв'язок, вузол, нитку тканини – лейтмотив і глибока парадигма українських страждань, що проникає в екзистенційні глибини балтійського та кавказького походження. У такий спосіб багатофункціональне полотно литовської музичної творчості, відроджене в нинішній боротьбі ідентичностей, розгортає свої орнаментальні лінії та повертає сяйво просторам Європи, що колись були покриті варварською темрявою.

**Ключові слова:** світло; темрява; сутартіне; хорал; Кабеліс; Наталевічус; Мартінайтіс; Україна; Гія.

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