

Ecaterina Gîrbu,

PhD in art studies and culturology, associate professor,
Academy of Music Theater and Fine Arts Republic of Moldova, Chisinau
katerinagbu@gmail.com
ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4207-3892>

RECONFIGURING ROMANTIC ILLUSIONS IN MYSTIC WALTZ BY VLADIMIR CIOLAC

Abstract. This article examines *Mystic Waltz*, a recent composition by Vladimir Ciolac, one of the leading contemporary composers from the Republic of Moldova. Through a structural-semantic analysis, the study reveals the work's conceptual and stylistic affinities with Franz Liszt's *Mephisto Waltzes*. Ciolac reimagines the philosophical narrative of Doctor Faustus, captivated by the mystical figure of Mephistopheles and driven by his relentless pursuit of power and knowledge. The reconfiguration of Romantic illusions takes place through the affirmation of Gretchen's pure and redemptive love — her sincere emotions becoming a force that seeks to rescue Faust from self-destruction.

The musical language of the piece synthesizes traditional structural formulas with contemporary sound textures, shaped by a network of intonational references. The image of Mephistopheles is constructed through the use of dissonant intervals, which carry a symbolic weight and contribute to the atmosphere of menace and instability.

The composer contrasts these «diabolical» elements with consonant intervals — musical representations of Gretchen and Faust's love — that illuminate the narrative with fleeting moments of tenderness and hope. Although Mephistopheles succeeds in deceiving the lovers, the lie ultimately collapses under the weight of emotional truth. The resulting instability, both musical and symbolic, is emphasized through the collision of dissonance and consonance — underscoring the eternal tension between illusion and redemption.

Keywords: waltz; genre; mystic; philosophic; semantic.

РЕКОНФІГУРАЦІЯ РОМАНТИЧНИХ ІЛЮЗІЙ У МІСТИЧНОМУ ВАЛЬСІ ВЛАДИМИРА ЦІОЛАКА

Анотація. У цій статті розглядається *Mystic Waltz* — нещодавній твір Володимира Чолака, одного з провідних сучасних композиторів Республіки Молдова. Через структурно-семантичний аналіз дослідження виявляє концептуальні та стилістичні спорідненості твору з Мефісто-вальсами Ференца Ліста. Чолак переосмислює філософський наратив доктора Фауста, захопленого містичною постаттю Мефістофеля та керованого його невпинним прагненням до влади й знань. Переконфігурація романтичних ілюзій відбувається через утвердження чистої й спасенної любові Гретхен — її щирі почуття стають силою, що намагається врятувати Фауста від самознищення.

Музична мова твору синтезує традиційні структурні формули з сучасними звуковими текстурами, сформованими мережею інтонаційних відсилань. Образ Мефістофеля створюється за допомогою дисонантних інтервалів, які несуть символічне навантаження і сприяють атмосфері загрози та нестабільності. Композитор протиставляє ці «диявольські» елементи консонантним інтервалам — музичним втіленням кохання Гретхен і Фауста, що висвітлюють наратив миттєвими спалахами ніжності та надії. Хоч Мефістофель і вдається обдурити закоханих, обман зрештою розкривається під тягарем емоційної правди. Отже, отримана нестабільність, як музична, так і символічна, підкреслюється зіткненням дисонансу та консонансу — що акцентує вічне напруження між ілюзією і спокутою.

Ключові слова: вальс; жанр; містичний; філософський; семантичний.

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Introduction. The musical culture of the Republic of Moldova encompasses a diverse stylistic panorama, within which composer Vladimir Ciolac, a native of Ismail, occupies a significant position. His artistic pursuits reflect a sustained interest not only in composition but also in conducting and pedagogical activity [1]. Ciolac's oeuvre constitutes a rich and multifaceted body of work, marked by thematic, semantic, and generic diversity. His musical language synthesizes traditional formulas with sonorous textures shaped by various intonational references that traverse the tonal sphere.

Among his more recent works is the programmatic miniature *Mystic Waltz* [2], composed in 2017 for string orchestra. This composition may be considered one of the most representative contributions to Ciolac's instrumental output, marking his first engagement with the waltz genre. Through this work, the composer continues the tradition of the waltz while simultaneously offering a personal reinterpretation. A historiographical overview of the genre allows for the identification of both traditional elements and stylistic influences that are assimilated and recontextualized within the composition.

In approaching the waltz with an emphasis on reconfiguring romantic imagery, Ciolac articulates a distinct vision of a mystical and fantastical image. This artistic gesture enables a more nuanced understanding of the conceptual framework and the specific characteristics of his musical language.

Purpose of the Article. The present study aims to offer a semantic and structural analysis of *Mystic Waltz* for string orchestra by Vladimir Ciolac. It seeks to identify the most significant points of intersection between this work and Franz Liszt's *Mephisto Waltz*, to sketch the semantic imagery through the lens of reconfigured Romantic illusions, to carry out a detailed examination of the musical discourse, and to highlight both the compositional architecture and the distinct musical language employed in the piece.

Complex Analysis. The score of *Mystic Waltz* by Vladimir Ciolac is written for the standard string orchestra ensemble: first and second violins, violas, cellos, and double basses. The work is set in E minor and employs a 3/4 meter, typical of the waltz genre. The thematic core of the composition emerges from its title, which evokes a mystical dance and suggests a fantastical landscape — a romantic reminiscence of the past. The composer's use of the tempo indication *Moderato*, further qualified by the expressive marking *Capriccioso* (Example 1), implies a nuanced interpretive approach. This specific expressive marking serves to characterize the central figure of the piece as a mischievous, perhaps even diabolical presence — an entity that unfolds its intentions with subtle calculation and persistent resolve.

Such a portrayal aligns conceptually with the devilish figure in Liszt's *Mephisto Waltz*, inviting comparisons in both atmosphere and semantic construction.

The musical narrative thus unfolds as a dramatic interplay between elegance and irony, fantasy and menace — elements that are intricately woven into the harmonic texture, motivic development, and formal design. Through this approach, Ciolac not only engages with the Romantic tradition but also reshapes it, producing a work that resonates with both historical depth and contemporary expressivity.

Semantic and Structural Analysis of *Mystic Waltz* by Vladimir Ciolac. In shaping the semantic imagery of *Mystic Waltz*, the frequent use of dissonances throughout the musical discourse plays a decisive role — especially in the central section, which leads to the work's climax and highlights elements of the grotesque. Semantically, the composition resonates with Franz Liszt's *Mephisto Waltz*, particularly through its portrayal of a demonic figure akin to Mephistopheles. This resemblance is supported by using of dissonant intervals, notably the tritone — historically referred to as the *diabolus in musica* during the Middle Ages.

Moderato (♩ = 80)
Capriccioso

Vladimir Ciolac

Example 1

The interplay between the first and second violins — present throughout the piece — evokes the characters of Faust and Gretchen, locked in a dance imbued with romantic sentiment. Meanwhile, the harmonic support from the other instruments forms a sonic web — a metaphorical net woven by Mephistopheles — that ensnares the two characters in a landscape of illusion and desire. Through this vision, the philosophical core of the Faustian myth is articulated: Dr. Faust, in his relentless pursuit of power and knowledge, becomes vulnerable to the mystical figure of Mephistopheles, while Gretchen emerges as both victim and potential redeemer, attempting through her love to save Faust from damnation.

Ciolac's *Mystic Waltz* encapsulates a rich semantic and philosophical universe. From dynamic nuances to the intentional use of specific intervals, the composition vividly portrays the presence of Mephistopheles and his corrupting influence. The recurring undulating motif and tritone interval function as intonational symbols, serving as anchors for the overarching conceptual narrative. Each recurrence of these motifs prompts the unfolding of new musical «scenes», each offering a distinct representation of the fantastic and the sinister. Interspersed throughout are glimpses of Faust and Gretchen's emotional states, communicated through consonant intervals — thirds, sixths, and octaves — that express the tenderness and purity of love. These moments stand in stark contrast to the instability generated by the collision of dissonant «diabolical» intervals with the fleeting harmonic clarity of love, ultimately reinforcing the dialectic between illusion and truth.

Formal Structure and Thematic Development

- *Mystic Waltz* is a single-movement composition that follows a tripartite formal structure with an appended coda. Each of the three sections includes a brief introduction, a localized climax, and an intermediate passage that serves to unify the work. The overall culmination occurs in the middle section, marked by dramatic tension arising from fortissimo dynamics and ascending melodic lines that suspend at their peak. The formal and expressive development is driven by several key motifs:

- The *H-E* pedal establishes both the mystical atmosphere and the tonal foundation in E minor.
- The construction of the *a* and *a₁* periods facilitates thematic dialogue between the violin sections.
- The undulating motif, symbolizing Mephistopheles' hallucinatory emergence, recurs throughout.
- The ascending motif of the *c* period and the descending motif at the conclusion delineate directional contrast and closure.

Dissonance carries a significant expressive charge, employed most intensively in sections depicting

growth in tension or grotesque transformation. The dynamic progression — from *pianissimo* at the outset to *pianississimo* at the conclusion — creates a musical arch that suggests an unfolding narrative situated outside of real-world logic, evoking a fantastical realm. *Mystic Waltz*, therefore, reconfigures Romantic illusions inspired by the Faust legend, offering a symbolic meditation on philosophical longing and the redemptive force of love personified by Gretchen.

Sectional Overview and Semantic Implications

The three main sections and coda of the *Mystic Waltz* are united by intonational links, with each subsequent part presenting material from the previous in a varied form. These sections are distinguished primarily by their evolving semantic content.

- Introduction: Sets the tone with enigmatic harmonies (*pianissimo* in the lower strings), evoking the heavy, deliberate steps of a mystical figure. The off-beat *marcato* markings introduce a feeling of suspension, preparing the listener for the dance to follow.

- First Section: Introduces the *a*-period and the thematic dialogue between first and second violins, interpreted as Faust and Gretchen. The counterpoint here suggests a mutual, if fragile, emotional connection, shadowed by Mephistopheles' unseen presence.

- Second Section: Serves as the dramaturgical core of the work. It is characterized by increased dissonance, sharp dynamic contrasts (*forte* to *fortissimo*), and grotesque, devilish energy. The influence of Mephistopheles dominates, yet the music hints at a deeper narrative tension.

- Third Section: Offers a temporary clarity in which the waltz character becomes more spacious and transparent. The lovers' dialogue is more cohesive, but ultimately the presence of Mephistopheles reasserts itself, culminating in a fall — represented by the despairing «sighs» in the violin lines.

- Coda: Summarizes the work's key motifs and intensifies the mournful image of Mephistopheles' retreat. Despite the apparent resolution, the lingering dissonance suggests ambiguity and unresolved conflict.

Symbolism of the Undulating Motif.

The undulating motif (*Example 2*) introduced in the *b*-compartment of the first section through the violin dialogue, becomes a central semantic and structural element. Rhythmic construction is based on sequences of eighth notes moving stepwise (by seconds), forming zigzag contours that oscillate around a central pitch. Each phrase culminates in an ascending third, serving as a micro-climax within the motif. Its wave-like motion evokes both Mephistopheles' elusive presence and the emotional turbulence of Faust and Gretchen, giving the motif a dual semantic charge — both menacing and human, grotesque and tragic.



Example 2

Semantic Symbolism of Intervals in *Mystic Waltz*

All these elements contribute to the hallucinatory and delirious atmosphere conveyed by the musical discourse. In certain passages, several undulating motifs are presented in succession, generating cumulative tension that intensifies the mood until it culminates in a grotesque depiction of the mystical scene.

Specific intervals recur throughout the work and significantly enrich its semantic dimension. Their symbolic weight makes them essential to understanding the overarching conceptual framework of the composition. One of the most expressive of these is the minor second, which carries a dual semantic charge: on the one hand, it is traditionally associated with lyrical emotion — grief, sadness, weeping — often referred to as the «interval of lament». On the other hand, it conveys chromatic tension and psychological unease. The *anacrusis* and contrapuntal lines played by the violins are frequently constructed around this interval, giving it structural prominence. Thus, the dialogue between Faust and Gretchen alternately expresses a sigh of sorrow or heightened emotional strain. The effect of tension and release — critical in the work's formal unfolding — is consistently shaped by the accumulation and discharge of energy through such intervals. Notably, the minor second expanded over the octave, which forms the minor ninth, appears only in the coda in the cello part, symbolizing the retreat of the defeated Mephistopheles.

The major second, when presented harmonically, functions as a *soft dissonance* that imbues the work with a mystical color. It first appears at the opening of the piece in the violins and increases in frequency as the musical narrative progresses. Its recurrence contributes significantly to shaping the climactic points of the work, embedding the mystical atmosphere implied by the title. However, in the third section, the interval gradually loses its intensity, resolving into the coda, which summarizes elements from all previous sections and closes the semantic arc drawn by this landscape of Romantic illusions. The major third, whether in harmonic or melodic form, typically suggests consonance, unity, and lyrical calm. In *Mystic Waltz*, however, this interval acquires an altered function. While it retains its luminous quality, it contributes instead to building musical tension. It appears harmonically only in the first interlude section and is rendered with tremolo in the strings, contributing to the surreal character of the soundscape.

The augmented fourth / diminished fifth, commonly referred to as the tritone, dominates the harmonic framework of the work. Historically labeled *diabolus in musica* for its dissonant and destabilizing character, the tritone has long symbolized chaos and evil. In *Mystic Waltz*, the tritone is strategically embedded — particularly in the bass line — and recurs across all sections. It underpins the passages that lead toward local and general climaxes, signifying Mephistopheles' malevolent presence and his corruptive influence over Faust and Gretchen. The harmonic sixth is traditionally associated with unity and dialogue. It appears syncopated in the second violin part, just before the general culmination. Despite the harmonic tension created by surrounding dissonances, the sixth suggests a moment of clarity — perhaps Gretchen's inner conviction and her attempt to rescue Faust from Mephistopheles' influence.

In the *intermedio* of the first section, the minor seventh appears melodically in the double bass, performed in a manner that evokes a moaning sigh of mystical figure. Its presence in the lower register accentuates this effect, suggesting Mephistopheles' calculated withdrawal or preparation for his next move. The spaciousness of the seventh interval allows the motif to echo obsessively throughout the musical narrative. The minor harmonic seventh acquires a *phantasmagorical* quality, especially when played ascending by the violins in period C, resolving into a local climax in the first section. Its chromatic motion and its interplay with other dissonances reinforce the narrative conflict between Mephistopheles and the two central characters.

The octave, both harmonic and melodic, holds structural and symbolic significance in this work. Just as white light encompasses all colors, the octave encapsulates the other intervals. It functions as a stabilizing force and is most prominent in the second section — the dramaturgical center — where it appears in the violin parts. The octave enhances the previously exposed material and amplifies the dramatic conflict between Faust and Gretchen. The melodic octave also contributes to the acoustic depth of the piece, acting as an *echoic* element in both the first and final sections.

Conclusions. Vladimir Ciolac's *Mystic Waltz* for string orchestra is a monopartite work structured into three distinct sections and a coda, all unified by a complex semantic and philosophical narrative. From its dynamic contour to the deliberate use of intervallic vocabulary, the piece constructs a mystical image of Mephistopheles exerting his corruptive power over Faust and Gretchen. This image is defined by the omnipresent undulating motif and the symbolic use of the tritone, which jointly function as thematic anchors. These elements encapsulate a process of ongoing transformation, with thematic cells being varied, recontextualized, and developed

throughout the work, resulting in a continuous metamorphosis of musical material.

Each recurrence of motivic material acts as a catalyst for the emergence of new semantic images, illustrating the grotesque and fantastical through a rich palette of expressive means. Within the dialogue of the first and second violins, sparks of romantic intimacy between Faust and Gretchen emerge—an illusion of the possibility of reconfiguring their doomed narrative. The presence of intervals such as the third, sixth, and octave transcends the boundary between the real and the imaginary. Gretchen emerges as the moral and emotional anchor of the piece: in moments of greatest tension,

she embodies the hope of salvation for Faust, who is tormented by his insatiable quest for knowledge, immortality, and power. Thus, the mystical atmosphere of the work retains its allegorical weight, emphasizing the Romantic seduction of illusory love and eternal longing. *Mystic Waltz* may be read as a musical allegory of the human condition — its confrontation with temptation, its oscillation between darkness and transcendence, and its persistent search for meaning. The semantic charge carried by the intervals functions as a network of unstable yet essential existential coordinates, structuring both the sonic and conceptual discourse of the work.

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