

Power Playing



Actor Cate Blanchett and writer/director Todd Field talk to **Michael Beek** about creating their riveting psychological drama set against the backdrop of very real music-making. This is *Tár*

Lydia Tár is the first woman conductor to take the reins of a major German orchestra. But you won't have heard of this particular conductor, composer and ethnomusicologist, because she is an entirely fictional character. Created by writer/director Todd Field, Tár is brought thrillingly to life by Academy Award-winning actor Cate Blanchett in a film that shocks with its depiction of a spectacular fall from grace, and dazzles with its intricate musical detail.

That detail was the result of a deep dive into the world of classical music by Field, whose starting point in 2020 was John Mauceri's book *For the Love of Music*. Finishing the book 'electrified' him, he tells me, and sealed the deal in terms of him wanting to take his idea for the

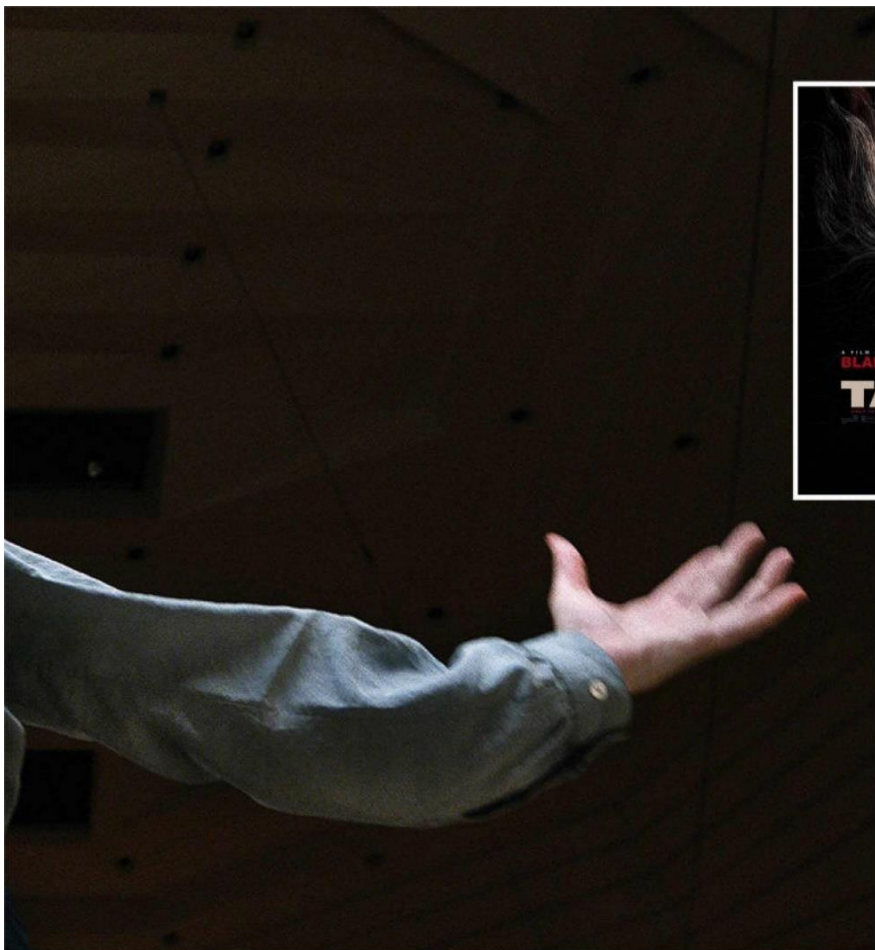
film forward, but he needed further help and couldn't believe where it came from.

'I was talking to Universal Music,' he says, 'and I said, "I'm about ready to start this thing. Do you have anyone that you think would be smart for me to talk to, who would be willing to speak with me?"' They said, "Well yeah there's this legendary guy named John Mauceri." I said, "You've got to be kidding me; I just finished his book!"

Mauceri, a one-time pupil and protégé of Leonard Bernstein, is today one of the most highly esteemed conductors and musical minds in the US. As *Tár*'s music advisor he was integral to Field's navigation of the classical world: 'John said to me, "Look, before we get to talking, read my other book, *Maestros and Their Music*, and before that you might want to do this..." So he



Tár's stars align: (l-r) Noémie Merlant, Sophie Kauer, Nina Hoss, Cate Blanchett and Todd Field at the Venice Film Festival



With the world at her feet: (left) Cate Blanchett in the role of conductor Lydia Tár; a poster for the film

kind of gave me this course to take, before I got into masterclasses with him. That was a thrilling privilege and such a highly rarefied opportunity for me.'

We are fortunate enough to be joined by Mauceri in our conversation, and the maestro is quick to share that, 'you have to be very careful when you talk to Todd, because he actually remembers what you say!' Such recall served him (and the audience) well, for the film is littered with observations, blink-and-you'll-miss-them references and familiar names that classical music fans will recognise.

'It had a giant impact on how the script was written,' Field continues, 'because essentially I had a character who is clearly an accomplished musician. However, she's also perhaps a bit overly concerned with legacy.'

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Tár is a film about the very nature of the creation of music from pencil to podium, told via a character who (like any number of notable men before her) would stop at nothing in order to stake a claim on and ensure her place in its story. So it's as much a film about power as it is about music, Lydia Tár seemingly indestructible as she holds court over one of the greatest orchestras, the musical world at her feet. But in an age when the actions of those in positions of power are under ever-closer scrutiny, it's Tár's blinding sense of indestructibility that ultimately proves to be her undoing.

For Cate Blanchett, the key to getting under the skin of the character was authenticity and truly understanding the working environment of a composer/conductor. 'In order for people to buy into the reality of the stakes of the drama and the character's predicament,' she tells me, 'it was absolutely essential that I steep myself in the practical day-to-day realities of someone who is working at that level of skill in the classical music world, and that her skill and her, dare I say, right to be there is unassailable.'





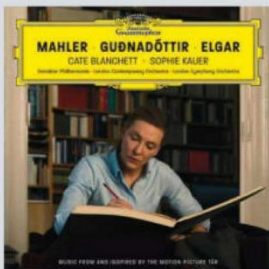
Tár – the album

Todd Field on the DG disc

Deutsche Grammophon is like the gold standard, the very peak, and Lydia Tár is obsessed with the idea that she is finally going to be able to complete all of Mahler's work with a single orchestra and have her picture on the cover of the DG albums.

I had never spoken to DG about this, and I chose an album that she became obsessed with – which had this kind of workmanlike image of Abbado with his sleeves rolled up, like he was honestly working on this gigantic score in the rake seating. I didn't know that it had never actually been a physical album, as it had only been released digitally; so when I asked DG if we could use it, I had to really beg them.

Then Hildur [Guðnadóttir, above] said, 'We should really do a concept album, where she actually gets to make the album where she appears on the DG cover.' And I said, 'That's crazy, they'll never let us do it.' We showed them the film and they said, 'Let's do it!'



Tár's creative minds: (left) composer Hildur Guðnadóttir; (right) music advisor John Mauceri; (below right) conductor Natalie Murray Beale, who coached Blanchett

Such practicalities had to include conducting, but with the pandemic in full swing, Blanchett would have to fend for herself and call in favours from friends, as she explains to me: 'Conducting is all about presence, power, charisma – that mercurial thing that passes between a human being on the podium and the orchestra – and I couldn't sit with anyone! So I started off by panicking and then – thank God for the internet – I went to the masterclasses of [Russian conducting teacher] Ilya Musin. So I started with that and I knew conductor Natalie Murray Beale so I said, "Look, I'm desperate, is there any way? You're probably busy!" But she was just so generous with her time and her insight.'

Murray Beale guided Blanchett through the technical aspects of conducting, topped up by her own reading of John Mauceri's writings on the subject. 'His insights into the art of conducting, both practical and ephemeral, were really useful to me,' she says. As for coming up with the character's baton style, the actor did hours of watching and listening to draw on a number of figures, as she explains.

'I did a deep dive into everybody's conducting style, a bit like a Bowerbird, to pick and choose. So there are people who've fallen from grace, and there are obviously people that I naturally gravitated towards. I love Bernard Haitink, Nathalie Stutzmann and Simone Young; but this isn't a character that is based on anyone.'

However, reveals Blanchett, it wasn't just the musical insights she needed, for Lydia Tár is someone of questionable conscience and motivation in her pursuit of glory. 'I thought about power as much as I thought about any particular musician; so I looked a lot at Valery Gergiev, actually – talk about someone who has fallen out of favour, simply because he's got his fingers in so many pies, politically and institutionally, and has kind of a flagrant disregard for power and yet is steeped in it. So I found that very interesting.'

Blanchett would have the challenge of actually conducting the Dresden Philharmonic during two weeks of shooting of rehearsal scenes at the city's Kulturpalast. I ask her what it was like to stand on the podium there for the first time. 'Oh it was terrifying, because they can sniff inauthenticity at a hundred paces,' she shares. 'I suppose what worked in my favour was they hadn't been playing big orchestral works because of the pandemic, and they had not been in the room together. So when I gave the downbeat they were slightly out of sync and we all laughed. Also they were out of their comfort zone, because they



had to act. When I got up I thanked them for their patience, in my school-girl German, and said that we needed to rehearse together, that they had to act and I had to conduct, and together somehow we would find our way. I think they sensed genuine humility, or my plea for help!

Having real musicians play their parts, quite literally, is a boon for the film's musical authenticity, which was taken a step further with the casting of British cellist Sophie Kauer as Olga Metkina. Aside from delivering a fine, dramatic performance as the young Russian cellist, new orchestra member and object of Tár's obsession, Kauer also performs Elgar's Cello Concerto. Todd Field was hugely impressed.

'Sophie had so much confidence, composure and poise,' he tells me. 'To be sitting with an orchestra of the calibre of the LSO for the first time would be terrifying enough, but to be playing scenes with Cate Blanchett would be equally frightening for many people. She really had a level of maturity; she was 19 when she was cast and really showed up and just did the most remarkable work.'

The London Symphony Orchestra appears on the soundtrack with Kauer, conducted by Natalie Murray Beale, performing the Elgar Cello Concerto. It's just one part of the





Screen partnership:
Blanchett with cellist Sophie
Kauer; (below) winning at this
year's Venice Film Festival

complex musicscape of this film; indeed some 26 minutes of the music in the film is actually played on screen, in real time. Aside from the Elgar, Mahler's Fifth (performed by the Dresden Philharmonic under Blanchett) makes a notable appearance, and then there's Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, played by Blanchett herself. Taking to the keyboard required further commitment from the actor who found teachers in Budapest and London while working on other projects. 'I don't know when she slept,' quips Field. For Blanchett, though, it was something she relished, having learned to play as a child.

'It was wonderful,' she reflects. 'With every pregnancy I said, "I'm going to go back and pick the piano up," but then life happens – it's a terrible indictment on me as a human being that I don't pick anything up unless it's for work. So that was an absolute joy, and it's something I vow I'll continue, not because I'm a musician by any stretch of the imagination, but for pleasure.'

The unfolding drama is further aided by composer Hildur Guðnadóttir, whose original music lives within and without the film, as she provides both the music Lydia composes and the film's score. There would, however, be nothing traditional about her music or how it would be used, as Todd Field explains.



“I thought about power as much as I thought about any particular musician”

'There needed to be some kind of propulsion in places for this character,' he says, 'because she feels like there's something on her back. And so that needed to be represented with some kind of score. Hildur works in a very intent, sonic space and there's nothing arbitrary about what she does; there's a real philosophy behind her choices, even if you can't see them.'

'She asked very interesting questions, like "What kind of gait does this character have; how does she walk?" And we landed on 120 beats, and so she scored pieces at 120 beats that Cate would then wear in her ear. So if you look at the way she moves, she's almost always moving at the same rate. She designed a whole slew of things which she recorded with the London Contemporary Orchestra before we ever shot, just to be played in the actors' ears.'

It becomes clear that *Tár* is in its very essence musical, so tied up is it in ideas of flow, rhythm and sonic intent. And there's something intensely operatic about the way Lydia's carefully constructed world frays at the seams, then tears to shreds before our eyes; all we can do is look (and listen) in horror.

John Mauceri hails *Tár* as 'an amazing achievement'. I'm inclined to agree. 🎵
Tár is released in UK cinemas on 13 January