

TÁR (2022)



Lydia Tár is intense and demanding in her conducting. (c) Focus Features

Director Todd Field's latest film, acclaimed by many as "a masterpiece," is but the third film that he has made—I reviewed favorably (in issues before those posted on line, sorry), both his 2001 *In the Bedroom* and his exciting dystopia-set but hopeful 2006 *Little Children*. And now, 16 years later, he directs the first for which he has written the script. And what a script, filled with a vast knowledge of classical music and those who compose and conduct it! And what a brilliant cast and star to bring it to life. Cate Blanchett's performance will be the benchmark with which to compare all other nominees for "Best Actress" this year. The following lengthy examination necessarily contains spoilers, so you might want to see the film before reading on!

The film begins with a view of text messages on a cellphone, a hint of the danger that the subject of the film is currently unaware, and therefore all the more dangerous. The persons posting the message clearly are not among the admirers of conductor Lydia Tár.

In a long sequence the real life reporter for *New Yorker* Adam Gopnik introduces his guest Lydia Tár ([Cate Blanchett](#)) by giving a revue of her credentials: she's a world-famous symphony orchestra conductor of the Boston Symphony and the New York Philharmonic (among other major orchestras), and for

seven years she has led the Berliner Philharmoniker. She's that rare living EGOT winner, and her mentor in conducting was Leonard Bernstein, who was a superstar transcending the classical label. Her being an out of the closet lesbian has not been much of a problem due to her genius. The two converse knowingly about music, conducting and philosophy before a large, adoring audience. She is about to return to Berlin to prepare her orchestra to record Mahler's Symphony No. 5, a notoriously difficult work. This will complete her Mahler cycle. She speaks knowingly of its composer Gustav Mahler and his wife and the process of conducting. Also of her mentor Leonard Bernstein. Gopnik is surprised that his guest downplays her role as "first female conductor" by praising the many pioneering women who came before her.

However, in subsequent sequences we see that she is anything but a humble person. Rather, one who is at the peak of her power and who knows how to use it—for good and ill. It is the latter that will cause the trouble foreshadowed by that glimpse of text messages, suggesting that social media can be even a greater power than fame and wealth—witness the case of the once powerful movie mogul Harvey Weinstein. And of Lydia Tár, whose last name even will be used against her by detractors because it conveniently can be reversed to "rat."

Early on, an ardent fan [Whitney Reese](#) (Sydney Lemmon) engages her in a conversation while Lydia's assistant Francesca Lentini (Noémie Merlant) hovers by, soon reminding her boss that she must move on.

We will see the multitasking Francesca interacting with Lydia throughout the film, treated like she was just a tool, and finally turning against her when her hopes for advancement are dashed—but that is later on. For now, Francesca guides Lydia to her luncheon meeting with Eliot Kaplan (Mark Strong), a wealthy banker who supports her Accordion Conducting Fellowship, as well as an amateur conductor himself. They gossip and she refuses his request to see her conducting notes

on a score. The ACF program they have set up is a scholarship designed to discover and assist promising young women conductors. One of these, named Krista, we will see just briefly, has been the partner in one of Lydia's many sexual trysts, and is trying to reconnect with her for help in her faltering career.

After her lunch Lydia is teaching her master conducting class at Julliard, and this is where her descent will begin, though it will be a long time before she is aware of it. Aspiring student Max (Zethphan Smith-Gneist), who identifies as BIPOC pangender, has just finished conducting, and Lydia launches into her critique, which becomes sidetracked when he expresses disdain for Bach because he is an old dead white composer and misogynist. She launches into a defense of Bach as an artist desparate from the man that changes into a

withering attack on the student. It is so virulent that even the wonderful explanation she gives at the piano of that composer's Prelude in C Major from The Well-Tempered Clavier cannot soften the harshness of her take-down of the fragile young man, one of whose leg shakes uncontrollably. He is so debased that he gathers up his score and papers and stomps out of the auditorium, yelling at her as he exits. Later camera footage of the episode, secretly recorded against the rules, will surface on the internet, perhaps by the person whose phone screen we saw at the beginning of the film.

Flying back on Eliot Kaplan's private jet to Berlin, Lydia reunites with her wife Sharon (Nina Hoss), the orchestra's concertmaster, but not in the warmest of ways, instead criticizing her for keeping too many lamps on and wasting electricity. They are raising a little Syrian girl named Petra, upon whom Lydia dotes. At one point, after the daughter reveals she is being bullied by a girl at school, Lydia again reveals her abuse of power—instead of going to a teacher or the girl's parents, she walks up to the little abuser herself and, like a mafia Godfather, tells the girl she is Petra's

father and that I will “get you” if ever she bullies her daughter again. She adds to the warning that she is an adult and that no one will believe her if she goes to a teacher to tell on her.

We see Lydia’s power on the podium, completely commanding the different instrumentalists how they should play and when to come in. She will tell little Petra, who arranges her many stuffed toy animals into an orchestra configuration, that not every musician can be the conductor, that “an orchestra is not a democracy.” Hers certainly is not, even though she maintains good will by conversing in German with the members. However, she manipulates matters to ease out her assistant director Sebastian and replace him with a person of her choice. She has been leading Francesca to believe that she will be raised to that position, but informs her that she chosen someone else.

Francesca had earlier asked what to do with the many emails former lover Krista had sent pleading her cause. Lydia not only had told her to delete them, but had also sent out a “do not hire this person” to various groups, her blacklisting effectively ending the girl’s hope for a musical career. In despair the girl had committed suicide, and others on the internet pick up those email. Francesca has ignored her boss’s order to destroy the emails, instead apparently sharing them out of anger and spite.

Meanwhile, we see another abuse of power by Lydia—in effect, a refusal to pay it forward—when during a blind audition for a position in the orchestra she detects by the sound of high heels that one auditioner is a woman, so she lowers the score on her score sheet. Also, during a rehearsal she announces that for the second piece on the Mahler concert they will play a cello piece and that they will not go outside the orchestra for a soloist, everyone is pleased. They assume that the soloist will be their own first chair celloist, but Lydia will disappoint them. She has become fixated on a gifted Russian cellist Olga (Sophie Kauer) whose video she has seen. Even

though the girl is not yet a member of the orchestra, Lydia finagles things to have the musician of her choice. The cellist becomes her new fling, which will threaten her relationship with Sharon.

The dark cloud on Lydia's horizon is foreshadowed by the screams and noises that she hears at various times, often at night, such as when she is awakened by the sound of her metronome. Earlier a mentor had said to her

"Schopenhauer measured a man's intelligence against his sensitivity to noise." If this is true, then Lydia must be very intelligent."

The cloud really descends when the orchestra's board meets with her to deal with the internet posts accusing Lydia of abuse of power. A highly edited version of her tirade against the Black Julliard student is making the rounds. The number of her detractors, accusing her of causing Krista to commit suicide because of her blacklisting is growing too large to be ignored or explained away. Lydia tries to fight back, confident and arrogant in the belief that her genius excuses everything.

Her rapid fall finds her at the end in an unspecified "East Asian" country where she practices with an orchestra, then seeks a massage, which does not end well (note the number of the dozen or so available massagers that she chooses!), and in the last scene she is conducting an orchestra whose audience has a very unusual form of concert attire. The screening audience I was a part of roared with laughter as the screen went black and the credits rolled.

What a comedown for the mighty! Todd Field's cancel culture film does not demonize its wielder of power—at first we are led to admire Lydia Tár as a genius who has accomplished great things. But then we are given glimpses of how she treats others who are just beneath her, such as Francesca, whom she

treats like an embodied Siri or Alexa. We wonder about her reduced status in the end. She is not sentenced to prison, like Harvey Weinstein. She is still in charge of an orchestra, albeit a very different one than the major one on the other side of the world. She might remind you of J.K. Simmons's Terence Fletcher, a jazz teacher in the 2014 film [Whiplash](#), except that her cruelty is more refined, and also has a sexual dimension.

Field's film leaves us with questions about Lydia Tár's present and future. What has happened to her relationship with the adopted daughter—her relationship with Sharon might be over, but what about with Petra? Will she ever be able to return to a classical music career? And we might wonder whose cellphone screen we saw at the beginning; and who took the video of the incident at Julliard?

Lord Acton, a great lover and historian of liberty, would have enjoyed this film as a study of the influence of great power upon one's character. Although as an orchestra conductor Lydia Tár's power would never equal that of Macbeth's in scope, she does become the murderer of the career of the young Krista whose attempts to get back in touch with her were bothersome. Krista may have died by her own hand, but that hand was controlled by a mind crushed by the cruelty of the woman she had admired and loved. Furthermore, who knows what has happened to the Julliard student Max, a fragile soul whom she had treated so cruelly! What future in music could he hope for after having exited her class so tumultuously?

However we regard Lydia Tár or think Todd Field does, the film's creator, teamed with the brilliant Cate Blanchett, has given us one of the most memorable films of the year, centering on a complex person who is neither all-heroine nor all villain. Every single moment the great actress is on screen she compels attention, even the rise of an eyebrow, the tilt of her mouth, or some little business with something, such as bread in one scene, conveying volumes. There are

several moments when she is finishing conducting a session in which everyone has been inspired by her to give their best, we can almost feel the joy she is feeling, and which the others feel as well. She may be a moral monster, but she can lead others to create sublime moments of beauty for everyone to experience. In her private life she has misused her power to get others to serve herself, but on the podium she is able to do what her mentor Leonard Bernstein had taught her is her role, namely, that the conductor's role is to serve the music of the composer.

You will want to see the film, for it's insights and ideas. The question of separating the artist from the person's great work will always resonate—remember the great film about Mozart *Amadeus*, a film about grace in which the more moral and sedate Amadeus was angry with God because he had blessed the boorish Mozart with far greater talent than himself? Or, within recent memory, the refusal of many to watch a Woody Allen film because of his betrayal of Mia Farrow and seduction of her daughter—does this cancel the greatness of *Crimes & Misdemeanors*, *Annie Hall*, *Manhattan*, or *Hannah and Her Sisters*? Also, in order to weigh in on the conversations that will issue forth from Hollywood during the Oscar buzz season, this is a “must see” film. Indeed, like myself, you probably will want to see it more than once, so rich and full is it.

This review will be in the November issue of VP along with a set of questions for reflection and/or discussion. If you have found reviews on this site helpful, please consider purchasing a subscription or individual issue in The Store.