Tár: A drama set in the classical music world

David Walsh
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Tár, written and directed by Todd Field, is a drama about a world-famous classical music conductor and how she is brought low by a sordid sex scandal. It is a serious and worthwhile film, whatever the balance of its various merits and defects.

Lydia Tár (Cate Blanchett)—born Linda Tarr in Staten Island, New York—is the first female principal conductor at the Berlin Philharmonic. She has a lengthy list of academic and professional accomplishments. However, through the combined efforts of a spiteful former associate and salacious, gossip-mongering tabloids, a previous unhappy relationship and its repercussions come back to haunt her.

Field (*In the Bedroom*, *Little Children*) takes on a number of significant subjects: the nature of the contemporary classical music world; the relationship between the artist, an inevitably imperfect human being, and his or her art; and the #MeToo campaign and its impact on cultural circles.

When we meet Tár, being interviewed onstage in New York by Adam Gopnik of the *New Yorker* magazine, who calls her "one of the most important musical figures of our era," she is apparently on top of the world.

Gopnik notes that Tár's mentor was conductor Leonard Bernstein, the brilliant American conductor and composer. The most important thing she learned from Bernstein, Lydia explains, was "attention to meaning, or intent. What are the composer's priorities, what are *yours*?" She is preparing to record a live performance of Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 5.

In the conversation, Tár, articulate but egotistical, indeed insufferable at times, grants herself almost godlike powers as a conductor: "Time is the essential piece of interpretation. You cannot start without me. *I* start the clock."

From here, Field and Blanchett (for whom the former wrote the screenplay) work to establish both Tár's professional credentials and her failings as a human being—especially the latter.

Lydia cheats on her wife, the Berlin orchestra's concertmaster, Sharon Goodnow (Nina Hoss), with whom she has an adopted daughter. We are led to believe that Tár—who lusts after various young women, including a budding, Russian-born cellist, Olga Metkina (Sophie Kauer), whose musical career she helps advance—has had numerous affairs.

Tár gives short shrift to both her predecessor in Berlin, Andris Davis (Julian Glover), and a financial backer and aspiring conductor, Elliot Kaplan (Mark Strong). She intimidates a girl who is bullying her young daughter Petra (Mila Bogojevic) at school. Tár rudely maneuvers to rid herself of an unwanted assistant conductor, Sebastian Brix (Allan Corduner), and fails (harmfully for herself, as it turns out) to give his job to her assistant and former lover, Francesca Lentini (Noémie Merlant), who expected to land the position. Her deceptions extend to the everyday—after falling on the street and injuring herself, Tár lies about it, claiming she was violently attacked.

Most seriously, another of Lydia's former lovers, an aspiring conductor, Krista Taylor (Sylvia Flote, seen only in Tár's memories or dreams), kills herself, leaving behind a series of accusations against Tár. The precise character of the relationship and the breakup is not made clear, but we see email messages from Tár cautioning other orchestras to stay clear of the woman: "I must warn you of the danger to your orchestra in hiring Ms. Taylor."

We have no way of knowing whether Krista was genuinely unstable and "dangerous," or Tár was merely vindictive. In any event, her slighting of Francesca leads the younger woman to leak the harmful emails to the media. This proves Tár's undoing.

Lydia can be calculating and selfish, she thinks highly of herself, she runs roughshod over those who allow her to, she obviously enjoys the "good life" while essentially commuting between New York and Berlin. All this does not commend her as a human being to the viewer.

Field offers an unattractive overall portrait of the contemporary music world. The individuals to whom we are more intimately introduced seem largely dominated by petty concerns such as career, prestige, money, personal comfort. Affluence envelops the goings-on, which take place (with one notable exception) in expensive living quarters and hotels, plush offices, first-class airplane compartments, limos and so on. A great deal of gloss and glamor is on display, and relatively little room made available for artistic aims and concerns.

The viewer is not given the impression that Tár, in her use of jargon, her showing off and her quasi-Machiavellian maneuvering and chilliness, is necessarily an aberration. She is simply the most polished and effective—to a point!—at operating here.

Field is attempting something important, to offer a picture and a criticism of the celebrity culture and its corrosive effects. The film points toward the corruption, the money-mad careerism, opportunism and pervasive cynicism–and their destructive consequences.

Is Lydia Tár a great musician? It is difficult to judge from what we see: snatches of her conducting, directing rehearsals, composing at the piano. There is enough here at least to suggest an immensely gifted individual. Clearly drawing on Bernstein's actions and words, especially in rehearsals, the film appears to incorporate aspects of the technique, knowledge and inspiration involved in conducting.

Field is evidently aware of certain immense contradictions in Tár's life. She speaks eloquently about music's emotional power, yet her very discussions are chilly, rarefied and alienated from the flow of life. Her physical surroundings appear sterile and antiseptic. Nearly all her relationships, claims Sharon, fairly or not, are "transactional."

Tár is fatally damaged, in the end, not so much by the #MeToo witch-hunting—that is merely the occasion for her professional downfall—but by turning her back on the ideals with which Bernstein and others initially inspired her. A late scene, in which she returns in disgrace to her lower middle class family home on Staten Island and tearfully watches a video of one of Bernstein's Young People's Concerts, is critical in this regard.

Furthermore, it is to Field's credit that he does take on, at least in part, the #MeToo question. In one of the film's early scenes, while teaching a class at the Juilliard School, a leading performing arts conservatory in New York, Tár encounters a student, Max (Zethphan D. Smith-Gneist), who declares that he is "not really into Bach" and "as a BIPOC [black, Indigenous and people of color] pangender person, I would say Bach's misogynistic life makes it kind of impossible for me to take his music seriously." When Lydia asks him what he means by that, Max replies, “Well, didn’t he sire like twenty kids?” And later, he adds, “White, male, cis composers? Just not my thing.”

The arguments are appalling, but they don’t originate with the misguided Max. The ignorant, philistine rejection of Shakespeare, Bach, Dickens and other giants is driven by political and economic motives. An entire petty bourgeois layer is prepared to write off some of the greatest accomplishments of world culture as part of its effort to gain more of a place in the sun.

Tár finds Max’s reasoning frightening, “robot”-like. She legitimately points out to him that “if Bach ’s talent can be reduced to his gender, birth country, religion, sexuality, and so on–then so can yours.”

Subsequently, in a conversation with the man she succeeded at the Berlin Philharmonic, Andris Davis, Tár–with Krista Taylor obviously on her mind–asks tentatively, “Did you ever have an issue with a student or colleague? Where that person …?” Davis immediately thinks someone has complained about him. “At this point they’ve missed their chance,” he puts in. “I’m out of the game. Thank God, I never had to be pulled from the podium like Jimmy Levine ... or hunted like Charles Dutoit.” Both prominent conductors, Levine and Dutoit were among the earliest victims of the ongoing sexual witch-hunt. Levine, one of the most remarkable opera conductors of the modern era, was essentially hounded to his death.

Not surprisingly perhaps, considering the present atmosphere, Field’s treatment of the #MeToo issue is somewhat ambiguous. *Tár* indicates the filthy role of the tabloids and the speed with which a lifetime’s work is obliterated, on the basis of murky episodes in the past. It’s not clear, however, what conclusions we are to draw. Sharon responds rather piously, if understandably. She even prevents Lydia from seeing their child.

Even with its restrained treatment of the #MeToo issue, *Tár* has offended and even infuriated those sensitive to the pressures of race and gender politics. Richard Brody in the *New Yorker*, for example, attacks *Tár* as “a regressive film that takes bitter aim at so-called cancel culture and lampoons so-called identity politics.” The film “derisively portrays” Max, “who says that he can’t take Bach seriously because he was a misogynist.” If not the student, certainly the argument *deserves* to be treated derisively.

In the *Nation*, Phoebe Chen (“Were We All Wrong About ‘Tár’?”) refers to “a student’s dubious but principled disavowal of Bach’s music.” “Principled!” In what possible sense? Chen goes on to complain that the film is “shaped by its sense of claustrophobic whiteness and the prejudices of its antagonist” and follows “a white liberal’s fettered cosmopolitan gaze.” These are right-wing attacks.

A genuine strength of *Tár* is its ability to suggest the possible combination of high art and low personal behavior. We have more than enough examples both past and present of such a duality.

Of course, while less than flawless people create important art work, there are definite boundaries to that. They cannot simply be limited in “any old way,” so to speak. Some extraordinary creative spark must exist in a portion of the personality, even if less desirable attributes are also present, the product of the damage done by class society.

Much less can craftiness and ruthlessness in personal and professional relationships be treated as characteristics inevitably accompanying artistic greatness, almost as its *precondition*. At times, Field threatens to make the misstep of solving one of his principal challenges, portraying artistic brilliance, by presenting Tár’s superciliousness, snobbishness and gift of gab as *evidence* of that quality. However, on the whole, the script and Blanchett’s performance do enough to suggest real aptitude and flair, even if they are imperiled by the surrounding circumstances and her own evolution.

Nonetheless, along with its many intriguing qualities, *Tár* also reveals real difficulties in its effort to shed light on the current musical world. To a considerable extent these are objective problems, the product of a culture unused in recent decades to criticizing society or itself.

The filmmaker does not set himself at a sufficient distance from the central character and her activities. The overly empirical, almost documentary style, which pushes our faces in the immediacy of the events, encourages a passive, fatalistic viewpoint. “Well, of course, that’s just the way things are.” Even if many of the critics are not all that observant, to put it politely, it still does not speak well of *Tár* that virtually no one has seen it as an indictment of the culture. To the reviewers, it’s a matter of hubris, a “genius” who thinks she’s above the law, an artist who pays a high price for her misdeeds, etc., etc. Some even see the film as an endorsement of #MeToo-style public punishment.

Tár, of course, takes her life and situation for granted, but we needn’t. We become too caught up by her personal magnetism, even borrow her thoughts and feelings for a time and lose track of the social impulses moving her and everyone else. Everything feels “natural” when it ought to feel strange and unnatural, and appalling. Annoyed or oppressed at certain points by the character (and the actress herself) trying so hard to impress, to “dazzle,” we are not clear what the filmmaker has in mind. Is he “impressed” too or is he more critical? One feels that he wants it both ways.

After asking us to identify, one way or another, with Lydia and her glittering world for the vast majority of the film, Field turns on a dime and asks us in the final few moments to recognize that Tár realizes she has betrayed or abandoned Bernstein’s legacy.

We see Bernstein in a video explaining to his Young People’s Concert audience, after passionately conducting a piece by Tchaikovsky: “Now we can really understand what the meaning of music really is. It’s the way it makes you feel when you hear it. … And the most wonderful thing of all, is that there’s no limit to the different kind of feelings music can make you have. And some of those feelings are so special, and so deep, that they can’t even be described in words. … And that’s where music is so marvelous. Because music names them for us. Only in notes, instead of words.”

Tár obviously recalls the impact Bernstein and the concert series had on her, perhaps pointing her toward a life in music. But so little preparation has been made for this crucial moment, that the inattentive viewer may miss the point (and most have). The film should have been built around this sequence or its content. *Tár* is to a certain extent misshaped by the gravitational pull of the culture it means to criticize.

One of the most obvious expressions of the difficulties is the fact that despite the careful, thoughtful working out of the drama, Tár’s fate is not sufficiently poignant or affecting. We are left rather unmoved by her misfortune. It simply feels like another inevitable, if unfortunate, fact of life. Whereas, if we are to take the rest of the film seriously, the loss of such an artistic personality is not only an individual tragedy, but a major blow to cultural life.

In any event, with *Tár* Field has done something unusual that we ought to be grateful for: a film that demonstrates intelligence and sensitivity and deals with complex questions in a nuanced manner.