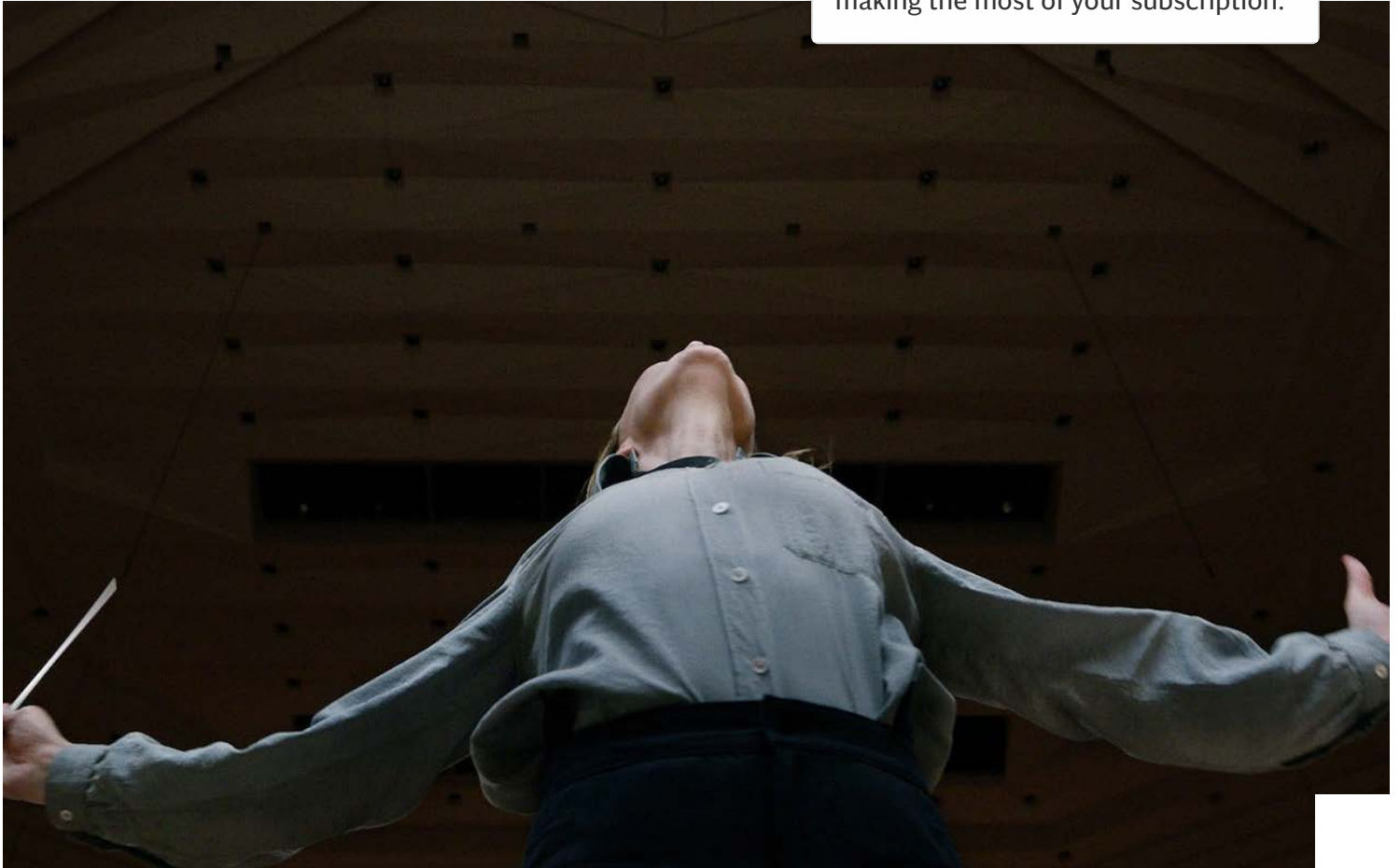


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Why classic music's 'culture of fear' is much worse than Tár

A powerful female maestro who abuses her students? To many in the classical music world, Cate Blanchett's film is far from fiction

By Izzie Price

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“I was still bleeding from where they’d taken my cannula out,” says Sophie, a young, classically trained reed player who attended a lesson at her UK conservatoire immediately after she’d left hospital for a severe infection. Her teacher had said he couldn’t rearrange, and she was worried he’d think she wasn’t a serious musician if she didn’t go.

“It’s a lot of breath and air and I was in so much abdominal pain. I could barely get a note out – [and] he rinsed me,” Sophie continues. “Even though he knew that I’d been in the hospital, he was like [...]: ‘This is totally unacceptable, who do you think you are?’”

Sadly, Sophie’s experience is far from unique in classical music, in which a culture of discipline, precision, strict hierarchy and adulation of the usually male “maestro” has allowed such [abuses of power](#) to thrive unchallenged. A 2022 report by the Independent Society of Musicians (ISM) found that 66 per cent of women surveyed had experienced discrimination while at work, up from 47 per cent in 2018. “I don’t feel like the music industry has had its proper MeToo movement yet,” says Kathryn Williams, who co-authored the report. “And it seems to be getting worse.”

And yet an electrifying new film about such abuse in classical music turns our understanding of MeToo on its head. Todd Field’s [Tár](#), in cinemas now, stars Cate Blanchett as the formidable world-famous conductor Lydia Tár, who humiliates [students](#) who don’t see things her way and seduces young female protégés – even going so far as to end their careers when they don’t comply.

Despite Blanchett’s razor-sharp performance and Tár’s clever marketing (which left many viewers initially thinking Lydia Tár is a real person) the film is fictional. While Lydia Tár conducts a major orchestra we assume to be the Berlin Philharmonic, in reality, to quote Marin Alsop (who made history as the first female to conduct a major US symphony orchestra in 2007) “women are more likely to lead a G7 country or become four-star generals in the US army than they are to be principal conductor of a big orchestra”.

TÁR - Official Trailer [HD] - In Select Theaters October 7



It is for this reason that Alsop has described feeling “offended” by Tár “as a woman, as a conductor, as a lesbian”. In a recent interview with the Times, she said “to have an opportunity to portray a woman in that role and to make her an abuser – for me that was heartbreaking.”

Speaking to the Hollywood Reporter, Field explained his choice to make Tár female: “If the story was about a white male, you’d know how to feel in five seconds [...] but it was important to try to figure out another way to examine power itself.” Blanchett added: “We understand white male corruption. If you had a man in that role, it would have been a story about that, whereas [Tár] is about so much more”.

So how accurate is it to depict Tár as a woman?

“I haven’t experienced abuse by a woman or heard of it from others,” says Sophie. Anthony, a director of music at an Oxbridge college, tells me: “I have heard a few stories about women, but purely anecdotal. I have never experienced it, but the stories involve bullying.”



Conductor Marin Alsop has expressed her disappointment in the film | CREDIT: Alessandra Fratus

“There is and has been manipulation in the industry; powerplay, unfairness, expectations, abuse – maybe even worse than the movie shows,” Sarah Ioannides, conductor and music director, Symphony Tacoma, tells me. “But I think [it’s] unfair to portray this of a woman conductor, especially when women have been so long held back from gaining access to the podium, continue to battle sexism [and] misogyny and [...] are not well represented yet.”

Tellingly, the multiple stories shared with me for this piece focussed almost exclusively on male abuses of power (only one person reached out to tell me about a woman, but off the record). For instance, Anthony recalls having a lesson with a visiting teacher during his time at university: “Who, straight after the lesson, asked me out on a date. Straight away. Which made me feel really uncomfortable,” he says. “And that person is revered as someone who is immensely talented [...] and everyone looks up to him. But he has this reputation of being smutty and asking his students out on dates.”

Sophie, meanwhile, tells me she’s been informed that women aren’t as good at “male instruments” as men. “Not that instruments have a gender, because they don’t”, she adds. “[It’s] usually said by fellow musicians in casual environments, but sadly I’ve had a musical director say it, too.” At a gig this year, Sophie was told she was the “token vagina” by a fixer – “someone who sorts musicians for gigs”.

Classical music fosters what Williams terms a “culture of fear, where victims are afraid of losing work or damaging their reputation” – something we also see in *Tár*. “If you get a reputation for calling people out, there’s a risk of not getting hired again,” says Sophie. “Because those people don’t want to check their behaviour. That’s why I’m really self-aware of not making myself too identifiable.”



Cate Blanchett has been scooping up awards for her performance | CREDIT: Focus Features

And, with more than one in three music jobs wiped out by the pandemic and the plummeting cost of living crisis, many performers simply cannot risk losing work.

“The musicians that I work with – they’re all very aware of what inappropriate behaviour is, and what abuse of power looks like,” says Anthony. “What I don’t see a lot of is excusing. But there is a tolerance culture, saying: ‘Yes, this person [is] really inappropriate and sometimes I wish I didn’t have to work with him, but needs must and I can’t afford not to sing in that choir, or whatever’”

Even if they could, there is often no centralised system within which to report abuse. “What route does a victim of an abuse of power have? Where can they go?” Williams points out. “Often, it’s nowhere. Most [musicians] are self-employed and so they fall out of any legal protections of the Equality Act. There’s no HR function, if it’s a casual bit of work”. And so the lack of repercussions persists and power abuses are able to continue, unchecked.

Anthony tells me about incidents of grooming and sexual coercion by older male singers, which he experienced years ago. “It’s resulted in me having a lot of trauma and therapy,” he says. “[When this happened], there was no professional body that I could report this to – and I never have, actually, I’ve just dealt with it by myself, with my therapist, and [I’ve] told a few close friends. But there was no one, really, to go to.”



Lydia Tár humiliates students who disagree with her | CREDIT: Focus Features

So what tangible change could be made to end power abuses in classical music?

Williams explains the need for clear sexual harassment policies in place with orchestras, for example. “There needs to be a code of practice, there needs to be guidance, and there needs to be protection from victimisation for people who report their experiences”.

Anthony, meanwhile, recommends anonymous feedback forms be distributed by those in positions of power; something he’s done himself. “Anonymous feedback forms, in every choir [for example], would be an amazing thing to do. And it would be really telling to see which [choral directors] don’t do it.”

Whether or not Tár could do its bit to help usher in the classical MeToo movement remains to be seen; but ultimately, it all comes down to eradicating the culture of fear that’s still perpetuated by too many of those at the top. As Sophie says: “We need to be teaching people

from the grassroots level, right up through conservatoires right into the industry, what is acceptable and what's not. We need safe reporting systems. We just need to feel safe to call people out and hold them accountable without being in fear for our jobs.”

Some names have been changed

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