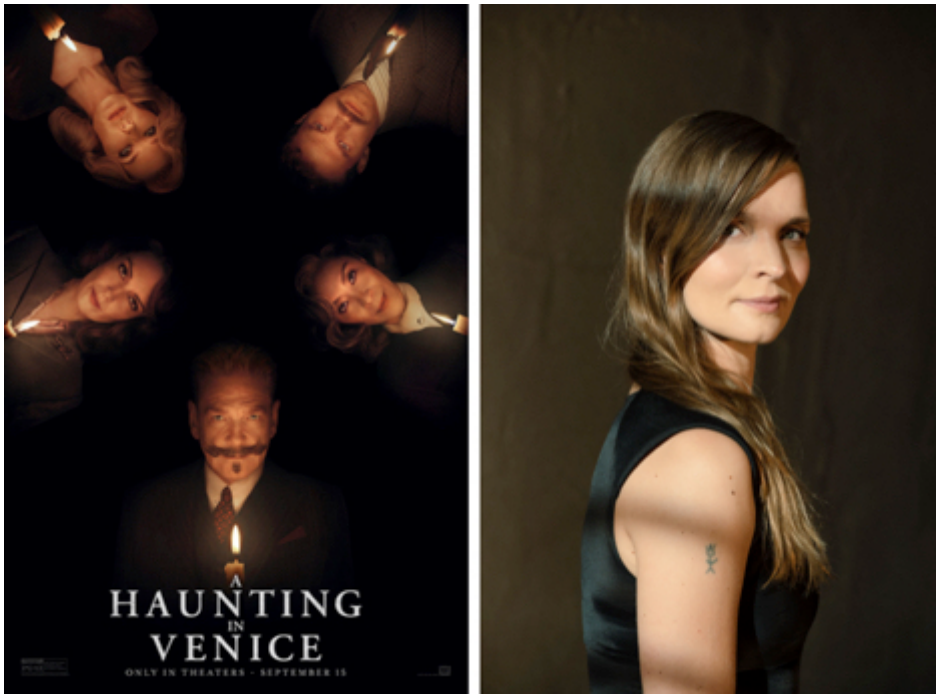
Hildur *in Venice*

Hildur Gudnadóttir joins Kenneth Branagh for *A Haunting in Venice*.

By Erik Heine



Hildur Guðnadóttir Photo Credit: Camille Blake.

Icelandic composer Hildur Guðnadóttir has been active in film, television and video game music composition for over a decade. Coming from a background of cello performance and composition, she attended the Reykjavik Music Academy, the Iceland Academy of the Arts, and the Berlin University of the Arts. She often performed cello with contemporary artists and band such as Hauschka (Volker Bertelmann) and Múm, as well as composer Nico Muhly, and collaborated for many years with the late Jóhann Jóhannsson. She also released multiple recordings of her own compositions between 2006-2014.

Guðnadóttir has been the composer of such high-profile films as *Tár* and *Women Talking*, and won multiple awards for her score for *Joker* and her work on the HBO series *Chernobyl*. Her most recent film score is for longtime Patrick Doyle collaborator Kenneth Branagh's latest foray into the Hercule Poirot series, *A Haunting in Venice*, based on the Agatha Christie novel *Hallowe'en Party*. She talked to me about the influence of classical music of the 1940s on her score, and how acoustic instruments provided the right sounds for *Venice*.

Erik Heine: Hello, Hildur, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me today. I've been listening to your music for almost a decade now.

Hildur Guðnadóttir: You have?

EH: All the way back in 2015 when the Nordic Affect album *Clockworking* came out. That was the first time I heard your music.

HG: Oh, right. You heard that record?

EH: Yes.

HG: Not many people reference that record, so that's a kind of an obscure one.

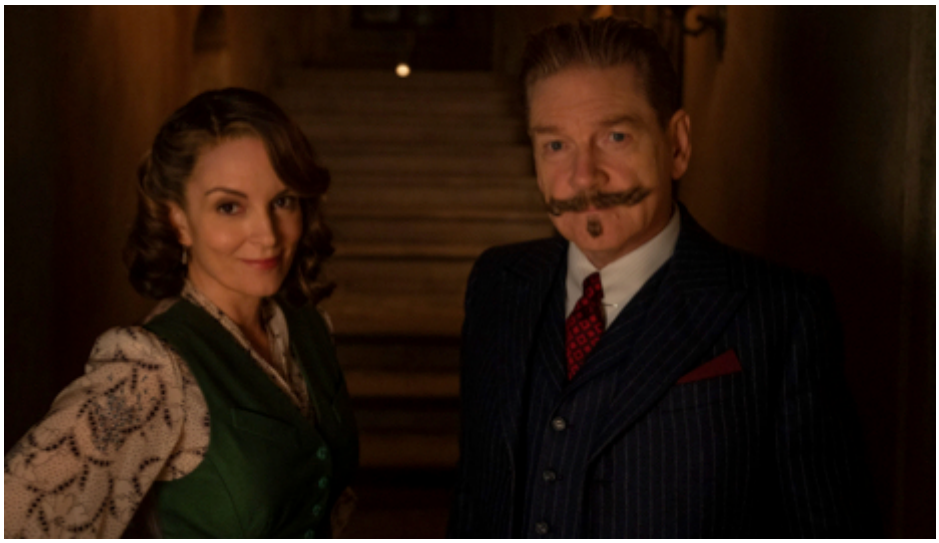
EH: I've been familiar with Anna [Thorvaldsdóttir's] music for a little bit longer than that, and so that was the reason that I got it, and then the rest of the album turned out to be terrific, too.

HG: Oh, great, nice.

EH: I had a chance to see *A Haunting in Venice* a couple of days ago and it was fantastic. I'm hoping to be able to ask you some questions that you haven't been asked yet in some of your interviews. To start, the opening credit music for the film announces that this is going to be a very different Poirot film from the other two that Branagh has directed. It also sounds like an invitation for the audience to participate, almost like an incantation to summon the audience there. Can you talk a little bit about that opening credit music?

HG: Yes, exactly. For the score, I was really interested in the time that the film takes place, which is kind of a post-war environment, and Poirot is asking himself what happened to him before the war and during the war and who he wants to be after the war. And seeing when the film happens, I felt that there were so many parallels to the questions that composers of this time were asking themselves. It influenced the way tonality was changing around this time, so I thought it was interesting to connect the sense of tonality to the timeline, essentially.

In the pre-war era, we have this very romantic sense of melody, so that's kind of what I'm referencing in the stuff in the timeline that happens in the before times. As we get closer to the present and the future, the tonality becomes much more abstract and atonal, following the direction that forward-thinking composers of the time were heading. I used a sense of tonality to set up the timeline and the score, accordingly.



And then we have these situations or things that are happening in the film that I feel are kind of in between. They lie in between what's real and what's not real, and the space that we're in in the beginning of the film, which is, Poirot was having this dream and we're unsure if it is real. What is the space that we're in? We're traveling

between the past and the present. I felt it was interesting to explore this sense of tonality that is neither atonal nor overly romantic. I'm really interested in, I don't even know if you call them melodies, this kind of music that creates a state, rather than to tell us what to feel. It just creates a place.

I feel like the opening melody is kind of... I don't even know if you call it melody. The opening state creates a space for the audience to enter that's a kind of neutral space. I always think it's so interesting how you can do that in music, how music can essentially create the place, really create the container for being or experiencing without necessarily telling you, "Okay, no, you should feel this, feel sad or feel happy." Of course, music is brilliant at feeling, but I also think it's beautiful how music can say, "Here we are," without telling us what to feel about it.

EH: I did a little bit of transcription of that cue and it sounds like it's in C Mixolydian, which is wild because C is very clearly tonic, but it doesn't sound major at all, even though it has that major third scale degree. I mean, there's so much emphasis on B-flat, D, C, that it has that minor sense, even though the scale itself is much more major than it is minor. And as you talked about that sort of duality, I think that fits so well into that idea of what's real, what's not. Is it major, is it minor? We're not really sure, even though there is an answer.

HG: Yeah, I think that's exactly it. By it being not left or not right, but it's kind of in the center. And I think it's so interesting how you can do that with music without there being an obvious answer, without there being an obvious way to analyze it, without there being an obvious way of saying, "This is how it is or this is how you feel." This is just like a state.

EH: When it comes to some of the composers of the pre-war and post-war era, I can hear little hints of Italian composer [Luigi] Dallapiccola in the score. I can hear some references to [Olivier] Messiaen and his harmonic language and the *Quartet for the End of Time*. One of the things that I heard in the "Confession" cue was that the music has that same sense as the last movement of Messiaen's quartet. And instead of having the piano being the accompaniment, we've got the strings sort of doing that pulsing over the violin melody and over the clarinet melody. Was that something that you were thinking about, particularly in reference to the doctor's

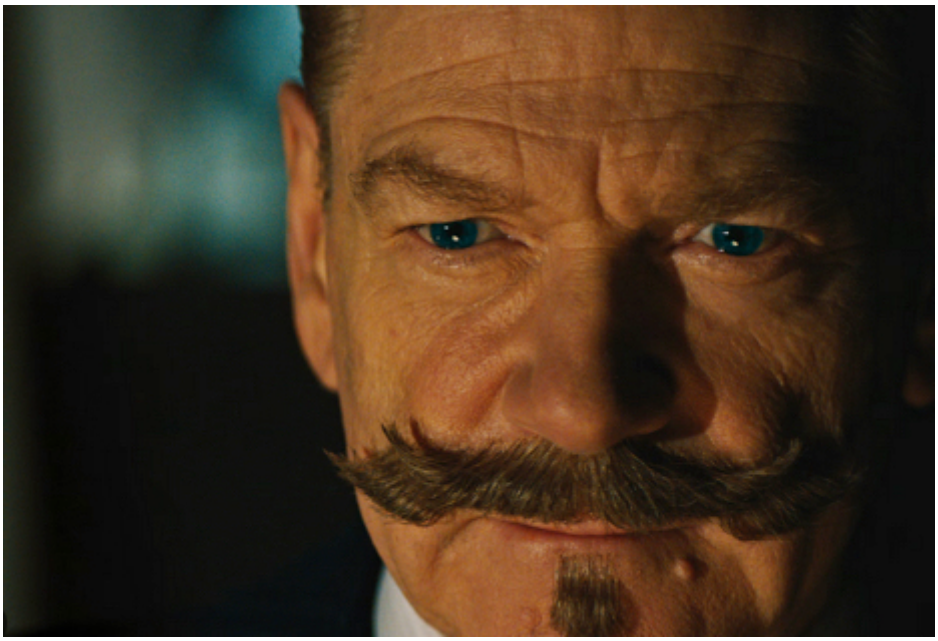
story about his PTSD and the liberation of the [concentration] camp, since Messiaen was in an internment camp?

HG: Absolutely. That's really well spotted for you, because I think it's the quintessential musical portrayal of being in war. I mean, it was literally written in the [prisoner of war] camp, so I think it can't really be any more wartime than exactly that music. It's the most heartbreaking piece of music. I love the piece so much. I was trying to, without obviously trying, to sound like Messiaen, but changing the orchestration. But I think that [particular] sense of tonality is so absolutely quintessential to being in distress, but full of emotion at the same time. That piece was a big timeline inspiration to me.

Also, I think we can learn so much about the time and how it's orchestrated. For example, how Messiaen is just working with the instruments that he has at hand in the camp, which I think obviously, not all composers of this time were in concentration camps, but I think as the transition happens from the romantic era into the more atonal era, people are not necessarily very open to this kind of music, so they don't have a huge audience or they don't have a huge budget for hiring musicians for these kinds of pieces. I think that's kind of interesting what they do with smaller groups of musicians, and that's something that I felt was also important for the orchestration of the score—that it wasn't this big, grand orchestral score, because these composers that I find so inspiring at this time, that's not how they were working. They were scaling down in order to express their sense of building up a new world. But I feel like most of the time they had quite a limited means to do that.

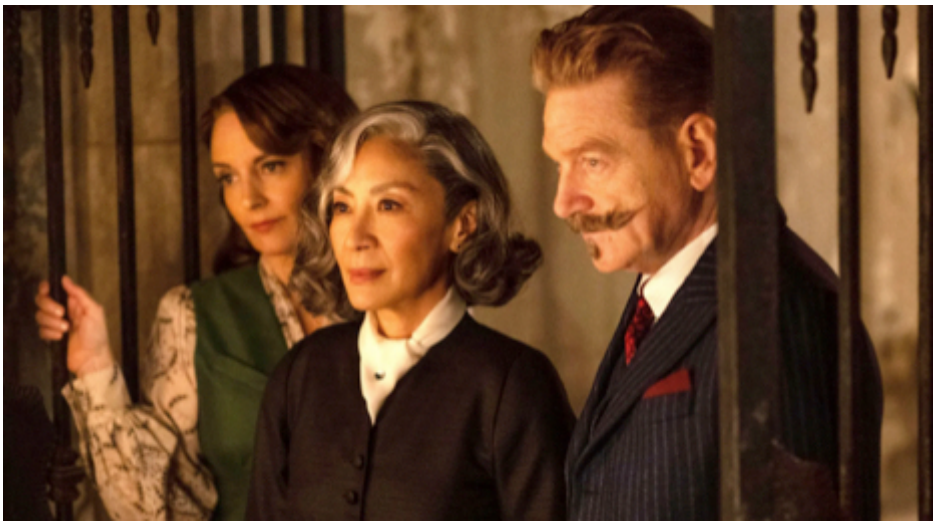
EH: That's fantastic because that leads into my next question, which is about the chamber ensemble and with the whole insular setting in the palazzo. They're all inside this one place and not only are all of our characters stuck in there, but Poirot is stuck in his own mind, which has its own sense of insular. And instead of coming up with various themes for all of the characters, we just have music that expresses the inner thoughts of these characters. How did you come to that decision to express more of what the characters are thinking, rather than having more thematic music for naming the characters?

HG: I think first of all, Ken [Branagh], he wanted to do a completely different type of film. Originally, it was him that wanted the film to be smaller or for the score to be smaller in scale, because he wanted the claustrophobic feeling of the palazzo. I thought that was so completely in line with what I was thinking for the orchestration. Of course, we're spending much more time also with Poirot and his inner dialogue than we are in most of the other films, where it's much more about these big travel scenes and all these characters get a lot of space. But in this film, Poirot already gets a lot of space and we're spending a lot of time with him as he's figuring himself out, not just the case.



I think that was influential in how the score was set up as well. It's very focused, the score. And you can see that, for example, in scenes where they're on the gondola in the early parts of the film, they're traveling. And you have this big fireworks scene and you see the whole city and it's all really beautiful. I think traditionally, you would probably go for a rather grand orchestral moment just to enhance the feeling of the city and the surroundings. But I thought it was much more interesting, because we're focusing in on [Poirot], to bring it all down to this solo clarinet, just to give the sense of himself and subconsciously focus our attention much more inwards and to the front of our seat, because we're like, "Hey, what's happening? Why is it so small? What am I supposed to be focusing on?"

I think music is brilliant at twisting our sense of expectation, especially when you're working with the genres. Subconsciously when you have these little twists, it changes your attention a little bit. I thought that was quite interesting to play with in the score, and therefore, by keeping it really close and small and kind of claustrophobic, we're always having to focus our attention on maybe singular things, rather than the whole story.



EH: That's a fantastic explanation, thank you. The "Séance" cue, this is the moment where Poirot maybe wants to believe, or at least is considering the possibility that there is something out there after he's so very clearly declared, "Nope, there's nothing, there's no afterlife, there's no soul." And then we get this "Séance" cue where all of a sudden, anything is possible. And to me, this is the biggest place where you're using the extended techniques in both the woodwinds and in the strings. Could you talk a little bit about the multiphonics in the clarinets and the sort of techniques that you used in the strings, if you used any ponticello or col legno or anything like that?

HG: Well, I think that's also such a big part of this time and the change in direction, because the composers at this time, they were so excited, they were concerned about breaking the normal way of [writing music]. So, as they're figuring out this new sense of tonality, they're also playing a lot with extended techniques and multiphonics and trying to get new sounds out of classical instruments.

I think this time in music history is so wonderful and creative, where people are really exploring, "What do we have? What are the possibilities?" I felt like first and foremost, that was a part of the exploration that I needed to be a part of the palette of the score. And it lent itself so egregiously to these horror things (*laughs*) and these soundscaping moments or these wild sounds they get from these instruments, like the jump scare. (*Screams*) The instrument's shouting at me! It almost felt like those themes wrote themselves in that sense.

EH: Things like the Bartók pizzicato and all of those other sorts of techniques. And again, like you said, composers are looking to create new sounds with instruments, and the seance, this is where anything is possible, so it makes perfect sense to use those sorts of techniques in that particular cue.

One of my favorite films that I've watched in the last decade is *Mary Magdalene*, which is of course, a film that you scored with Jóhann Jóhannsson. Could you talk a little bit about working with him and his influence on your approach to film music?

HG: Yes. We worked together for over 15 years, I think, so we were very close friends, kind of like family. And we grew up, of course, in the Icelandic experimental music scene, which is, as you can imagine, tiny (*laughs*). We kind of grew up together. My father [Guðni Franzson] conducted most of his early pieces and performances. My dad runs a chamber ensemble in Iceland, one of the leading contemporary chamber ensembles called CAPUT [Ensemble]. They've also performed his conducted pieces as well. So, I kind of grew up in contemporary chamber ensemble practices.

And Jóhann, my dad really helped him out a lot when he was beginning and then we were also just hanging out a lot and we were very close collaborators on pretty much everything we did, whether it was my music or his music or whatever we were doing. And the way we worked together, it was very Icelandic, which is very open and collaborative and non-hierarchical. It was kind of like a dialogue. Someone would come up with an idea and then the other person would answer, and then they would just go back. We had this very nice musical chat for 20 years.

EH: Yeah, that's really wonderful, thank you for sharing that. My last question for you is how come the finale music from *Haunting in Venice* isn't on the soundtrack?

HG: Ah (*laughs*). Well, I felt the finale music, it was almost to feel like we were leading into the next film. For me, it felt like not really a part of this story, but more a part of whatever's going to come next. I think when you release a soundtrack record, at least the way that I worked, I did a lot of extra recordings to create pieces that are not necessarily in the form that they are in the film. A lot of the pieces are extended, or I reworked them so they can stand alone as pieces of music, so you don't feel like you're listening to a 30-second scene. Just as an interesting exploration of the story, of the film and the way that I think about it, and also instead of just exploring how the cue ended after the film, also exploring my process of how I was shaping when I wrote it. That's kind of how I think about soundtrack records in general. I felt like if you'd listen to the whole record and then that piece came, it would just stick out like…

EH: Oh yeah, it's totally wild.

HG: It didn't belong. Yeah, it's really wild. I think it totally fits for the film, but I was imagining putting the record on and being like, "What the hell is this?" You know what I mean? (*Laughs*)

EH: Oh, absolutely (*laughs*).

HG: I just decided to skip it.

EH: Yeah, because I'd listened to the soundtrack before I went to see the film, and then we get to the end of the film and it's like, "Wait a minute, where was this?" And exactly as you said, it's so remarkably different from everything else. It does make sense that it wouldn't be on the soundtrack, but still, it's something that I would love to listen to again.

HG: No, it's a fun piece and I think it fits in the film, but it would be very weird with the rest of this.

EH: Thank you so much for your time. I can hear whistles in the background, it sounds like you're at football [soccer] practice.

HG: Yeah, I am. Well, actually, my son, he's playing a game. Because I've been so busy lately, as a typical soccer mom, I'm multitasking and working and watching my son at the same time (*laughs*).

EH: It's been an absolute pleasure to talk to you, Hildur. Thank you.

HG: Of course, likewise. Thank you. And you were totally right, you had very great questions. That was very fun to actually have some musical questions to answer and not just that Hollywood gossip (*laughs*).

—FSMO

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