

GUIDO CANTELLI: NBC SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA AMERICAN DEBUT • Guido Cantelli, cond; NBC SO • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1222-2 mono (2 CDs: 119:29) Live: NBC Studio 8-H, New York, 1-15-1949¹, 2-5-1949²

HAYDN ¹*Symphony No. 93.* **HINDEMITH** ¹*Mathis der Maler Symphony.* **FRANCK** ²*Symphony in d.* **RAVEL** ²*La valse*

Review by Ken Meltzer

FANFARE July/August

In May of 1948, Arturo Toscanini, while in Milan, attended rehearsals by the La Scala Opera House Orchestra and conductor Guido Cantelli (1920-1956). Toscanini immediately recognized a kindred spirit in Cantelli, and he invited the 28-year-old conductor to lead a series of four broadcast concerts with the NBC Symphony Orchestra. A new release from Immortal Performances (IP) offers the first Cantelli/NBC SO concert from January 15, 1949 (the conductor's US debut), and the concluding program in that series, February 5, 1949. Guido Cantelli quickly established himself as one of the foremost conductors of his generation. After the initial series of NBC SO concerts, Cantelli returned to conduct that ensemble on numerous occasions. He was also a welcome guest conductor with major orchestras in the US and Europe. In 1956, Cantelli was named La Scala's permanent conductor. He was also under intense consideration to succeed Dmitri Mitropoulos as music director of the New York Philharmonic. But on November 24, 1956, Cantelli died in a plane crash shortly after taking off from Paris's Orly Airport. Cantelli was 36 years old. Toscanini, 89 and in declining health, was never told of his protégé's death, for fear it would prove too much for the frail maestro.

We are fortunate that despite the tragic brevity of Cantelli's life, the conductor is well represented by studio and broadcast recordings, including those featured on the new IP set. Because of Toscanini's admiration for Cantelli, and the senior maestro's significant role in furthering the young man's career, comparisons between the two are both inescapable and frequent. To my ears, the similarities relate more to both conductors' overarching aesthetics and approach to music, rather than interpretive specifics. Guido Cantelli, like his mentor Toscanini, was a brilliant talent; a conductor with extraordinary and patrician musical sensibilities, possessed with the necessary technique and fierce will to communicate to the musicians and audience his perception of the composer's intent. It's worth mentioning that in his NBC SO debut concert, Cantelli conducted two works—Haydn's Symphony No. 93, and Hindemith's *Mathis der Maler* Symphony—that were not in Toscanini's repertoire.

IP's Richard Caniell attended Cantelli's debut with the NBC SO: "When Cantelli emerged from the wings that first time to conduct the NBC Symphony, I was amazed at his youth. Though he was 28, he looked much younger – extremely slender to the point of being skinny, tall and enormously intense...Cantelli, gaunt, doubtlessly nervous, conducted Haydn and Hindemith..." In this concert, perhaps to that point the most important of his career, Cantelli triumphantly overcomes whatever nerves he may have been experiencing. The Haydn Symphony No. 93 is superb. The first movement's *Adagio* introduction bears the appropriate weight and mystery, a perfect foil to the ensuing *Allegro assai*—sprightly, muscular, and brimming with high spirits (Cantelli observes the exposition repeat). The second movement is, as per Haydn's direction, a

true *Largo cantabile*, with Cantelli's broad tempo the foundation for a rendition of surpassing lyricism. The sequence leading to the movement's bassoon interjection has all the elegance and anticipation one could desire, placing Haydn's joke in full relief. The third movement *Menuetto* has an endearingly rustic personality, and the *Finale* abounds with vivaciousness and humor. The *Mathis der Maler* Symphony was a favored work for Cantelli. Hindemith's symphonic repurposing of his operatic score well suited Cantelli's affinities for both the concert hall and opera house. Here, Cantelli leads a searing performance that gives full due both to the work's radiant spirituality and episodes of blazing conflict. Cantelli and the NBC SO would soon make commercial recordings for RCA of both the Haydn and Hindemith. They offer similar musical qualities to the broadcast, and better recorded sound. But this document of Cantelli's triumphant US debut is of the irreplaceable value.

The February 2 1949 broadcast opens with the Franck D-minor Symphony. Cantelli and the NBC SO recorded the piece in 1954, the conductor's first stereo recording. The broadcast is notably broader in tempo, especially in the first movement. The tension Cantelli and the NBC SO achieve in the slow v. quick-tempo episodes in the movement's introduction is electrifying. Both performances share a fierce dramatic profile, tautness of execution and phrasing, and dark, concentrated sonority. And while the RCA stereo recording is in far better sound, both performances are essential. The concert ends with Ravel's *La valse*. Once again, Cantelli's theatrical instincts are at the service of a programmatic work. The journey from Ravel's nostalgic evocation of mid-19th century Vienna to the apocalyptic, hallucinatory conclusion is masterfully charted, and overwhelming in impact.

A brief interview of Cantelli by NBC announcer Ben Grauer, the conductor charming and self-effacing, serves as an interlude between the two broadcasts. Grauer's broadcast commentary for both concerts enhances the sense of occasion. In addition to Richard Caniell's commentary on the featured recordings and his appreciation of Cantelli's artistry, Robert Matthew-Walker offers his own insights on the brilliant Italian conductor. All told, this is a priceless document of a unique and lamented artist. Recommended.

Five stars: Guido Cantelli's US debut, conducting the NBC Symphony Orchestra